

FROM TOWN TO COUNTRY

A NOVEL



TADGH QUILL-MANLEY

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To the common good.

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“Employ your time in improving yourself by other men's writings, so that you shall come easily by what others have laboured hard for.” - *Socrates*

This book is spoken through the voice of a NARRATOR. The voice of the narrator is utilised as a storytelling device, and attempts to convey the varying perceptions of the numerous fictional characters. This does not necessarily reflect the views of the author.

Preface: The Divide

In recent years, society has found itself at a critical juncture. Across the globe, lines have been drawn between communities, between ideologies, and between cultures. These lines are not always visible, but they are felt in the subtle exchanges between people in everyday life. Prejudices, be they old or new, have resurfaced, inflaming fears and misunderstandings. Where once there may have been curiosity or a sense of connection, now there is often mistrust and suspicion. These divisions, whether intentional or born from ignorance, are growing, and they have begun to erode the very fabric that once held society together. In a world that should be defined by its collective strength and shared humanity, we are, instead, retreating into smaller, more insular groups.

It is easy to dismiss these societal shifts as the result of political strife or economic disparity. Indeed, these factors do play their part, but at their core, the deepening rift comes from a failure to understand one another. Communities, once interwoven through common bonds of work, family, and neighbourhood, now seem increasingly isolated. People have

become distrustful of the unfamiliar, and in turn, the unfamiliar has become a source of fear, hatred, and division. It is a phenomenon seen in many parts of the world: social groups segregating themselves more sharply, driven by prejudices that turn differences into insurmountable walls.

The world we live in today is one where people increasingly find it easier to stereotype, to cast aside those who don't share their backgrounds, opinions, or experiences. A person from a different culture, for example, might be seen as an outsider or even a threat. Individuals with different political leanings or world-views are too often reduced to caricatures rather than understood as complex, nuanced individuals with their own stories. These social divisions are not just an inconvenience or an abstract issue, they are a barrier to social harmony, to the common good, and to the honour we should show one another as human beings.

This novel, though wrapped in the suspense and intrigue of a thriller, serves as a reminder of the deeper need for societal unity, compassion, and understanding. It asks us to look beyond our immediate assumptions and judgments of others. It challenges us to question whether we truly know the people we think we do, and to reflect on the possibility that those who appear different on the surface might, in fact, share far more in common with us than we realise.

At the heart of the story is Sarah, a young woman who, in the midst of a complex and dangerous criminal investigation, is forced to confront not only the criminals who have wronged her family, but also her own assumptions about the people around her. Throughout the narrative, the characters encounter a series of obstacles, both external and internal, that force them to grapple with their biases and preconceived notions. As they struggle to untangle a web of crime and corruption, they find that the key to their success does not lie in their individual efforts but in their ability to trust one

another, to put aside their differences, and to work together towards a common goal.

The story is not just about crime, justice, or intrigue. It is about the simple truth that honour, kindness, and understanding are essential elements in human relationships. When we allow our prejudices and biases to cloud our judgment, we lose sight of what truly matters: our shared humanity. The fractured state of society—marked by rising tensions and division—must be addressed, not by further entrenching ourselves in our separate groups, but by actively seeking to understand those who are different from us. This understanding is not always easy, nor is it always comfortable. But it is necessary if we are to heal the wounds of division and create a society where people can live together in peace and mutual respect.

As the story unfolds, we see how Sarah, alongside her father, navigate not only the complexities of the organised criminal world, but also the similarly complex world of human relationships. They come from different backgrounds, with different experiences, yet their paths converge as they realise that their success hinges on their ability to overcome their mutual prejudices and see the truth in one another. Despite their differences, they come to understand that the strength of their unity is greater than any of their individual flaws or biases.

In a world where differences seem to divide us more than unite us, it is easy to become discouraged. But it is also important to remember that these differences do not have to lead to conflict. The truth is that people—no matter their backgrounds, their beliefs, or their circumstances, are more alike than they are different. The fundamental needs of a person, which are love, respect, the desire for safety and security, the hope for a better future—are all universal. It is our willingness to recognise this, to acknowledge our shared

humanity, that allows us to break through the barriers that divide us.

The characters in this book, though initially entrenched in their own worlds, eventually realise that it is through embracing each other's differences and working together that they are able to achieve something greater than they could on their own. Their journey is one of self-discovery and growth, of realising that the labels they had placed on others were more a reflection of their own insecurities and misunderstandings than of reality.

It is no secret that the world we live in today is fractured. From political ideologies to religious beliefs, from social classes to cultural identities, the divide between "us" and "them" seems to be growing ever wider. Every day, we hear about the latest conflict or controversy that pits people against one another. But the truth is that division does not have to be the final word. Just as the characters in this story find common ground in the most unlikely of circumstances, so too can we, if we are willing to open our hearts and minds to others. It is in this spirit of unity, of bridging gaps, of overcoming preconceived notions, that the story unfolds.

In a world that seems increasingly divided, the message of this novel is clear: social harmony is not just a lofty ideal but a necessity. If we are to build a better, more compassionate society, we must be willing to work together, not just in spite of our differences but because of them. We must learn to see the humanity in others, to listen with empathy and understanding, and to recognise that it is only through collaboration and mutual respect that we can hope to create a better future.

While the thriller elements of the story, which are full of suspense, danger, and high-stakes action may capture the attention of readers, it is the deeper message of unity and mutual respect that ought to linger long after the final page is

turned. This is a story not only about justice and redemption but about the power of human connection. It is a reminder that, no matter how divided the world may seem, we are all part of the same global community, and that the strength of our bonds is far greater than any forces that seek to tear us apart.

As you read this book, I invite you to reflect on the divisions in your own life, on the people you may have dismissed or misunderstood, and on the potential for connection that exists if we choose to look beyond our prejudices. The characters in this story prove that it is possible to bridge the gap between us, to see past the surface and recognise the value in every person we meet. In doing so, we not only change ourselves but change the world around us, one small act of understanding at a time.

In the end, this is not just a story of crime, investigation, and intrigue. It is a story about the power of coming together in the face of adversity and recognising the shared humanity that unites us all. The message is clear: we may have our differences, but it is through understanding, compassion, and unity that we can overcome the challenges of our time and build a better, more inclusive world for future generations.

In today's society, we often hear about "codes of conduct," particularly in the realms of politics and corporate life, designed to set standards for behaviour and ensure ethical decision-making. These codes are crucial for maintaining professionalism and order, yet they tend to focus more on guidelines than fostering a sense of honour. We rarely hear about the latter. Honour, in this sense, doesn't refer to merely 'following the rules,' as it implies a deeper commitment to upholding values such as respect, fairness, decency and courage, even when no one is watching. While a code of conduct may dictate what is subjectively acceptable in a given environment, a code of honour speaks to an individual's own

essence, urging them to make choices based not on compliance, but on a commitment to doing what they believe to be right. This concept is especially important today, where the erosion of trust in institutions, and the rise of selfishness and individualism often overshadow our sense of collective good. A code of honour can be a powerful tool in cultivating empathy, respect, and mutual understanding, ultimately shaping not just our actions but the moral fabric of society. In this story, we see that, sometimes, doing things “by the book” can be dishonourable and unfair.

We live in a period where, it’s increasingly common for individuals to weaponise their “concerns” as a means of undermining projects or people they disagree with or dislike. What starts as a genuine worry can quickly morph into a tool for criticism, not necessarily to seek resolution, but to derail or discredit. People often cloak their personal biases or agendas under the guise of concern, raising alarms over minor issues or magnifying them out of proportion to create doubt, fear, or mistrust. Whether it’s calling out flaws in a proposal, or scrutinising the character of an individual, these concerns are less about genuine improvement, and more about casting shadows over something or someone they feel threatened by or disagree with. The trouble lies in the way supposed ‘concerns’ are manipulated to stir sentiment, making it harder to function honourably. In the case of this novel, we see a character get ‘thrown under the bus,’ in the form of an attempted framing. Rather than addressing the root causes of issues, the focus shifts to creating divisions, halting progress and cultivating an environment where fear of being attacked or misunderstood takes precedence over honest, open dialogue.

The choice is ours. Let us choose unity. Let us choose understanding. Let us choose to honour one another, regardless of background, belief, or circumstance.

1

"Oh my God, I'm going to miss the latest series of Love Island!"

Kate gasped aloud, her voice barely more than a breath of horror as she stared at the text message on her phone. Sarah's words, simple in their finality, reverberated through her mind. The cold, cruel certainty of them stuck in her thoughts like a splinter lodged beneath her skin. She had never quite realised how dependent she had become on the show, how integral it had become to the fabric of her life. Love Island—the glitzy, shallow distraction that had allowed her to momentarily forget the absurdity of existence, had now been ripped away from her, without even the courtesy of a proper goodbye. The reality of contemporary Ireland, meanwhile, was miserable.

She read the message again, hoping for some shift in meaning, some miracle that would undo the damage. But there it was, unchanged. She would miss the latest season. She would miss it—not in the way one might miss a party or a favourite meal, but in the way a sailor misses the shore after months lost at sea. It was the anchor of her week, the balm for her restlessness. And now, like everything else, it had slipped through her fingers.

Her stomach twisted into tight knots, and her chest tightened. For the first time, a true wave of panic rushed through her, a feeling so foreign that she almost didn't know how to process it. It was strange, this feeling of being helpless, of being so utterly at the mercy of an event so mundane, so trivial. But the reality was that she had built her life around these simple, predictable pleasures. There were parties, sure, there were nights out and endless hours of reckless abandon. But Love Island—that ridiculous, empty distraction—had provided a comfort she hadn't even realised she needed.

How could this happen? How could Sarah, with her off-hand comment, unravel everything that Kate had built up in the small, fragile world she'd constructed for herself? If it hadn't been for that raid, if it hadn't been for that night when everything had gone wrong, she would have been at home, glued to the screen, watching the new series unfold. But now... this.

The train lurched forward, dragging Kate further from everything she had known, further from her familiar life, further from Love Island and all the little things that made the days bearable. She sank deeper into her seat, eyes glazed, staring blankly out of the window. Outside, the world seemed to move without her, oblivious to the storm raging in her chest. The train was on its slow, inevitable path south, heading to Mallow. Her fingers gripped her phone with increasing intensity, but there was no solace in it. No new notifications, no distractions that could quell the rising tide of anxiety.

The rhythmic clatter of the wheels against the tracks barely registered to her. Even the tunnel they passed through, black and engulfing, offered her no comfort. Normally, the isolation of the tunnel would have provided a momentary peace, a break from the buzz of the outside world. But today,

it only deepened her sense of disconnection. The darkness seemed to mimic the turmoil within her, swallowing her whole as the train plodded on, inching closer to its final destination.

For a fleeting moment, Kate allowed herself to close her eyes. Perhaps the sound of the train's wheels against the rails could soothe her; after all, it had provided comfort in the past. But even that was futile. The steady rhythm of the tracks seemed to amplify the noise in her head—the endless repetition of Sarah's words, the undeniable truth that she was no longer in control. The train sped up, taking her further from the comfort of her own life, and with it, the creeping sense that this was a point of no return.

She thought of the tunnel again. How strange it was that this black void, this nothingness, was what offered her a brief respite from the noise, from the world outside. There was something in the dark that soothed her, something in the silence that brought with it a chance to reflect. But even that, for reasons Kate could not explain, now felt insurmountable. Her thoughts spiralled as the train began to emerge from the dark stretch. She tried to focus on the things she knew she should appreciate—the green fields now spreading before her in a blurry sea of gentle rolling hills—but her mind, her thoughts, her very soul clung stubbornly to the loss of her evening ritual, her precious Love Island.

In the distance, she saw a swallow, gliding gracefully through the sky, its wings catching the faint light of the overcast sky. Kate missed the sight of it, her eyes too focused on the screen of her phone to take in the natural world. That swallow had something to teach her, something beautiful in its effortless flight, but Kate was oblivious to it. How could she, a self-proclaimed ecofeminist, be so blind to the wonders of nature? How could she claim to care about the world while choosing to bury herself in the artificial world of social

media, in endless arguments with strangers about who was right and who was wrong? She had retweeted the latest outrage over the loss of life in Palestine just this morning, but in that moment, she could not bring herself to acknowledge the simple elegance of the creature outside her window. It felt like a betrayal. A betrayal of herself, of the ideals she had once espoused so passionately.

The automated voice came again, breaking through her thoughts like a knife through butter. "Ladies and gentlemen, the train will soon be arriving at Mallow station." It was a mechanical reminder of where she was, of what awaited her beyond the confines of the train, but it did little to calm her nerves. She gathered her things, slipping her phone into her bag, though she knew it would offer her no comfort now. She could hear the sound of her own breath, shallow and fast, and it irritated her. She wasn't used to feeling like this—not over something so small, so silly. Love Island. Was it really that important?

As the train gradually slowed, the harsh, metallic clatter of the wheels lessened, and the blur of the outside world gradually gave way to the sharp edges of reality. She could now see Mallow clearly, the town laid out before her, heavy clouds hanging low in the sky, threatening to choke the life out of the landscape. It was as if the weather itself had conspired to mirror her mood. The train came to a final, screeching halt, and Kate was jolted forward slightly. She stood, her legs feeling shaky under her, as if they had forgotten how to move properly. The door opened with a hissing sound, almost too sudden, too loud, but Kate stepped out into the cold, oppressive air.

The breeze cut through her thin top, sending a shiver down her spine. The light, weak though it was, struggled to break through the clouds, but the battle was already lost. The world felt darker than it should have, a reflection of her inner

turmoil. She adjusted her bag and moved toward the car park, where Sarah was waiting.

Sarah, as always, was full of energy. Her eyes were wide, her smile too bright. She had a way of making everything seem less significant, as if the weight of the world didn't bear down on her in the same way it did on Kate.

"Hi, there!" Sarah's voice rang out with the enthusiasm of someone who hadn't seen a friend in far too long.

Kate forced a smile, the kind of smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Hi, Sarah, how are you?"

"Good, thanks! How was your trip?"

Kate inhaled sharply, the tension of the past few hours building once more. She wanted to lash out, to make a sarcastic remark, but she didn't. Instead, she spoke in the most casual tone she could muster.

"It wasn't much, just a train from Cork. I picked up a few things—mainly vape juice, really."

Sarah raised an eyebrow, clearly puzzled.

"Oh, right. Still, though, there must've been something interesting about it?"

Kate let out a small laugh, though it was devoid of any real humour.

"No, not really. It was just boring as hell. I spent the whole time reading Twitter, this American guy who's such a misogynist, ranting about how all non-vegan food is the devil's work. Like, seriously, who even thinks that way?"

Sarah didn't seem to know how to respond, but she managed a weak, noncommittal,

"I dunno, I guess you're right. Anyway, let's get to the car."

As they walked toward the vehicle, Kate's eyes widened in disbelief. There it was, a Land Rover Defender—large, imposing, its blocky shape standing in stark contrast to the sleek, modern lines of the vehicles she was accustomed to.

The round headlights seemed to glower at her, challenging her sense of propriety, and for a moment, Kate considered turning around and walking back to the train station.

"Oh my God, I'm not going in that monster!" she exclaimed.

Sarah stopped in her tracks, the hurt flashing in her eyes, though she quickly masked it with a forced smile.

"Why is that?"

Kate's voice rose, full of disdain.

"It's a symbol of oppression. It's archaic. It's literally terrible for the environment. How can you drive something like that, Sarah?"

Sarah paused, her smile faltering.

"My brother and my dad use it to bring new breeds of flowers and fertiliser for the ditches... It's helped us a lot with our appreciation of nature."

Kate rolled her eyes, but she could see that Sarah wasn't backing down. With a huff, she relented, although her tone was sharp.

"Fine, whatever. But I'm not happy about it."

Sarah opened the door, and they both climbed in, Kate's discontent bubbling under the surface. The seats were rigid and uncomfortable, the interior a minimalist horror. It was a vehicle of utilitarianism, of practicality, a machine built for work, not for comfort. How could this be what she was now expected to ride in?

Charlie, Sarah's father, was in the front seat, his large frame filling the space behind the wheel. His hair brushed the roof, and Kate could see the strain of his attempt to look respectable. To her, he looked every bit the part of the out-of-touch patriarch, right down to his Barbour wellies.

"Hello, Kate. Long time no see! I'm Charlie, Sarah's father," he said, his voice warm but faintly bewildered by Kate's distant demeanour.

Kate barely looked up, her gaze fixed firmly on her phone. "Hi," she muttered, her voice quiet, almost drowned out by the hum of her thoughts.

Charlie smiled, clearly unaware of the tension in the car. "Did you eat before you left? We can swing by Supermacs if you're hungry?"

Kate's response was swift, pleasant but cold.

"No, I'm fine, thanks."

Charlie, ever the obliging father, didn't press the issue. Instead, he fired up the engine, the roar of the unrefined diesel shaking the car to life. The vehicle groaned and chugged forward, moving with the slowness of a ship leaving dock. The world outside seemed to shift, but Kate remained anchored in the discomfort of her own mind, trying—and failing—to adjust to the slow, methodical departure from her past.

As they trundled through the townland of Ballyclough, Kate stared blankly out the window. Her eyes drifted over the countryside, the empty fields and quiet streets. This place, once familiar, now seemed foreign to her. This was not the world she had chosen. This wasn't where she belonged.

But here she was.

2

Behind the towering gates, a wide driveway stretched forward, leading to a paddock on one side. A sharp left turn would guide them up to the house, while going straight ahead would bring them closer to the ponies. They had arrived home—well, at least Sarah and her father had. Kate, however, wasn't as thrilled to be there. This place, so far removed from the pulse of city life, was hardly what she envisioned for her stay.

Once the car was parked outside the grand front door, they all stepped out, but Kate lingered behind, her disinterest palpable. She reluctantly ascended the concrete steps and passed through the door. Inside, the decor overwhelmed her with an air of age and tradition. The walls were adorned with old hunting scenes and portraits of long-gone ancestors—grandparents, great-grandparents, and extended family members. The bookshelves, heavy with antique Victorian charm, were dotted with rosettes that had been proudly displayed over the years.

Kate couldn't help but feel as if she had been transported to another time. The newest books she could find on the closest shelf were relics themselves—an early edition of John Maynard Keynes' *The General Theory of Employment, Interest,*

and Money, A Treatise on Photography by Sir William de Wiveleslie Abney, and *The Elements of Banking* by Henry Dunning MacLeod. Kate sighed inwardly, realising that the household seemed stuck in the 1930s, at best. To her, it felt more like a museum than a home.

The coffee tables were similarly decorated with images of revered figures—Pope Pius XII and St. John XXIII staring down at her from nearby frames. The entire place seemed crafted from dark, polished mahogany or rosewood, giving everything a weighty, old-fashioned feel. The modern comforts she was used to—things like comfortable sofas and contemporary design—were nowhere to be found.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Charlie said as he led them into the ‘good room.’

Kate sank onto the couch with a weary sigh. She was on the verge of retreating into her world of music, but before she could put in her AirPods, Sarah asked if she wanted tea. Kate half-heartedly declined, murmuring, “No, I’m ok, thanks.”

She almost immediately reached for her phone, ready to tune out to some generic chart-topping song, but then Sarah asked her another question. “Would you like to go outside? We’ve had some nice new flowers come up. You might want to have a look.”

Kate didn’t even look up. “No, thanks,” she muttered.

“Well, I’m going to make some tea,” Sarah said cheerfully. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

As soon as Sarah was out of the room, Kate began to scroll through her social media feed, hoping to distract herself from the suffocating atmosphere of the house. It felt like a prison, a gilded one, where even her simple pleasures—like scrolling through Twitter or Snapchat—seemed out of place. Every post from her new friends and the latest celebrities was filled with self-righteous diatribes about the patriarchy and ‘oppression,’ yet there was always an undercurrent of

flaunting sexuality. It all seemed so hypocritical—preaching freedom while simultaneously selling permissiveness as the ultimate form of relevance. Was this really what the world had come to?

Kate's attention wavered as she tried to think of something else to do. The television here was limited to the occasional news broadcast or carefully curated old movies—films that had been pre-approved for their 'depth' and 'meaning.' She longed for the freedom to watch whatever she wanted, not just what someone else deemed 'appropriate.' In her mind, it was as if the Censorship of Publications Board of 1929 had somehow found its way back to power.

Kate could hear the sound of Sarah's footsteps approaching, breaking her reverie. "I'm here! Sorry for the delay, I had to find a new box of teabags."

Sarah returned, but Kate didn't even acknowledge her, remaining absorbed in her phone. Her indifference was a shield, a way to mask the growing resentment she felt for her old friend's family, and for the situation she now found herself in.

Sarah, frustrated but trying to remain calm, poured her tea. It was nearly cold by the time she took her first sip—there wasn't enough milk, and she had barely touched the cup when she set it aside to cool further. She could sense the distance between herself and Kate growing wider, and she struggled to bridge the gap. After a long pause, she tried again. "It's almost seven o'clock. The road will be very quiet now, everyone should be home. If there are even many people on the road, to begin with."

Kate didn't respond, her eyes still glued to her phone. Sarah sighed quietly. *What had happened to Kate?* The person sitting on the couch seemed so different from the Kate she remembered—now, she was more like the apathetic "Jenny" from *Forrest Gump*, someone who couldn't see beyond their

own narrow view of the world. Sarah felt a wave of sadness wash over her.

She didn't try to speak again, instead drinking her tea in silence while watching Kate, lost in the glowing screen of her phone. Kate was busy messaging her new friends, making cruel remarks about her surroundings. A snide comment appeared on her phone, 'so old lol,' followed by another one, 'get a life.'

Sarah tried to make sense of it all. The summer was just beginning, and yet, despite the long days and fresh air, Kate seemed more interested in retreating into her digital cocoon than embracing the nature surrounding them. Sarah couldn't reconcile the Kate she once knew with the person sitting before her now.

She knew Kate had made a public display of her environmentalism on Twitter, but when it came time to take a simple walk outside and enjoy the fresh air, she was uninterested. Sarah found herself bewildered. It was a perfect evening—clear skies, a soft breeze, and the sounds of birds like blackcaps and house sparrows filling the hedges outside. Sarah took a deep breath. She wanted Kate to experience this, to reconnect with something real. There was never a better moment to embrace nature. As the Latin proverb goes, *audaces fortuna juvat*—fortune favours the bold.

She glanced at Kate, who was still oblivious to the beauty surrounding them. Sarah had learned that phrase from her younger brother, Peter. He was an adventurous soul, always eager to take risks. Sarah felt a pang of guilt. If Kate knew about Peter's philosophy, she might have found a way to dismiss it entirely.

"So, Kate," Sarah said, her tone changing, "I know a great spot to drink. It's not far from here."

Kate's attention snapped back to reality as she removed her AirPods. "Did you say 'drinking spot'?"

Sarah nodded. "Yes. A lot of people from town go there. Some might be there tonight."

"Why didn't you tell me about this sooner?" Kate exclaimed, suddenly excited. "We have to go now!"

Sarah was determined to get Kate outside, even if it meant telling a small fib. "We'll head out soon. But we can't let my parents know. I'll just say we went for a walk."

By 10 p.m., Kate was bouncing with anticipation. "Come on, let's go! You promised me this spot!"

Sarah grabbed her bag and hesitated for a moment. "I know, I know. Just give me a second. We still have plenty of time—the sun just set twenty minutes ago."

"Where do we get the drinks from?" Kate asked eagerly.

Sarah scrambled to come up with a quick answer. "A few of my friends are bringing it. They'll be there."

"Awesome!" Kate grinned. "Let's go!"

They slipped out of the house, but just as they were about to leave, Sarah's mother, Daphne, arrived home. She greeted them warmly, eager to check on Kate, but by then, it was too late. The two girls were already heading down the dark boreen, the narrow country lane with no streetlights or footpaths. The trees loomed overhead, blocking out most of the moonlight. They used their phones' flashlights to guide them through the dark, their footsteps muffled by the soft earth beneath them.

Sarah tried to make conversation as they walked. "How's life in the city?"

"I thought I was doing great, until... until everything just fell apart. I thought it would be better than this," Kate confessed, her excitement momentarily dropping.

"Well, at least there's something to do here," Sarah said with a quiet laugh.

"Yeah, thanks for telling me about this spot," Kate responded, more enthusiastically. "I thought this was going

to be like living in a monastery or a manor, totally boring!”

“Well, you’re welcome,” Sarah muttered, barely audible, her eyes on the path ahead.

The two girls came across a gap in a stone wall, an opening that seemed like the perfect opportunity for adventure. “It’s right here,” Sarah whispered.

Kate giggled. “This is going to be amazing. I thought I was going to be stuck in the 1900s.”

But when they climbed through the wall, the scene they were met with was nothing like what Kate expected. No fire. No party. Just empty silence.

“Where is it?” Kate asked, her disappointment creeping into her voice.

“It’s further up,” Sarah insisted, trying to keep the lie going.

“I don’t think so,” Kate said, a touch of suspicion entering her tone. “If there were a party, we’d be able to see the fire from here.”

Sarah hesitated. She knew she had to keep the ruse going. “Just follow me.”

But Kate wasn’t buying it anymore. “Are you sure this is the right place?”

“Yes,” Sarah said firmly. “But there’s no party.”

Kate stopped dead in her tracks, now completely confused and frustrated. “What do you mean? There’s no party? What’s going on, Sarah?”

Sarah paused. “I lied. There is no party. I just wanted to get you outside. The air here is amazing, Kate. Feel it. These trees, they’re coniferous.”

“You liar!” Kate shouted.

“I didn’t want you stuck inside, like some loser college student.”

“What do you mean by ‘loser’?” Kate demanded.

Sarah’s voice dropped to a low whisper. “I mean what

you're doing now."

Kate reached into her pocket and pulled out a small sandwich bag. At first glance, it seemed empty, but a closer inspection revealed a white powder lining the bottom.

"Kate! No!" Sarah gasped.

Kate, ignoring her friend's warning, opened the bag, scooped out some of the powder, and inhaled it through her nose.

Sarah recoiled in horror. This wasn't the Kate she remembered. She couldn't bear to watch. Her old friend was now doing drugs in front of her.

Without thinking, Sarah lunged forward, snatching the bag away. But Kate, her eyes wild with the effects of the drug, lashed out. She wasn't going to let anyone take her cocaine. Not without a fight.

Sarah bolted, heart racing, and Kate was right behind her, the chase taking them through the darkened woods. The path sloped down toward the river, a steep drop on one side. The ground was uneven, and Sarah knew she had to keep running or risk losing Kate.

Suddenly, Sarah tripped on a tree root and tumbled down the slope, desperately holding onto the bag as she fell. The dry leaves crunched beneath her as she rolled uncontrollably toward the river. Its violent current churned below, and she knew the danger was real—the river had claimed a life just two years ago.

But in the split second before she was about to hit the water, Sarah saw a tree branch. With a final desperate push, she reached out and grabbed it, feeling the strength of the tree holding her back from the river's pull. She let go of the bag, watching helplessly as it plummeted into the water and was swept away.

Kate, standing at the edge of the slope, finally seemed to regain some clarity. "Sarah! Sarah! Oh my God! Are you

okay?"

"I'm fine! I'm just hanging on!" Sarah shouted, still holding onto the branch with all her strength.

She tried to climb back up the slope, but the leaves and steep gradient made it nearly impossible. "Turn on your light! I can't see anything!" she called out.

Kate, breathless and anxious, shone her phone's flashlight toward her. Sarah slowly but steadily made her way back to the path. When she reached the top, Kate reached out her hand, her face a mixture of guilt and relief.

Sarah grabbed it and, with Kate's help, pulled herself onto the path. They embraced, and Kate, overwhelmed by emotion, began to cry.

"I'm sorry," Kate whispered, sobbing. "I've done so many wrong things..."

Sarah handed her the bottle of water, quietly allowing Kate to make amends in her own way.

3

Sure, here is the rewritten version with the suggested changes included:

‘BEEP, BEEP, BEEP, BEEP.’

The phone alarm was going off. It was seven o’clock in the morning. Kate was woken by the sound. A rough texture was irritating her neck. She was sleeping on the rough carpet of Sarah’s bedroom floor. Sarah lay on the bed in her clothes, undisturbed by the annoying alarm. Did last night really happen? Kate checked the dirt marks on Sarah’s elbows and knees. It wasn’t a dream.

Kate scrambled to the bathroom. She checked the mirror to find that her makeup had streaked. Her purple mascara had run down her face, leaving dark smudges on her sallow skin. She was in a bad state, but not as bad as Sarah, who would be lucky to be alive once she woke up from the trauma of the previous night.

Kate found a bag of cotton wool and makeup remover and tried to scrub away the mess. Charlie’s voice called them from downstairs.

“Girls, breakfast fry is ready for ye here! Rashers and sausages, buttered toast as well!”

"Okay, we're on our way down!" Kate's reply bought her a couple more minutes, but she had to get Sarah up and dressed. She approached Sarah and nudged her gently.

"Sarah, wake up. It's me. Breakfast is ready."

Sarah turned over, stretching her arms and letting out a big yawn. Kate exhaled, feeling a rush of relief. She was okay.

Sarah looked at the scuff marks on her clothes. She, like Kate, couldn't quite believe that the chaos of the previous night was real. The bright blue paint on the bedroom walls and the white cushions on the floor seemed like a far cry from their disheveled selves.

"Get up, quick!" Kate urged.

She opened the sliding glass door that led to most of Sarah's clothes. She handed Sarah fresh pants and a clean hoodie. "Put these on."

"Girls, the food's going cold!" Charlie called from below.

"Two seconds!" Sarah called back.

Sarah quickly changed and washed her face, her reflection in the mirror revealing none of the dark, clown-like streaks that had marred Kate's face. They rushed downstairs and into the kitchen, where the smell of rashers filled the room.

"Ye're very enthusiastic about breakfast," Daphne, Sarah's mother, said with a smile.

"I guess we love a fry," Kate replied, her voice carrying a nervous edge. Daphne didn't seem to notice.

"Did you enjoy your walk last night? We tried to ring Sarah's phone while ye were out, but there was no reply. We were worried for a bit, but maybe it was on silent. How did ye get on?"

Sarah was about to say something, but Kate interjected.

"Good! The air was so lovely and clean! It must've been those deciduous trees!"

Daphne raised an eyebrow. "I thought they were coniferous, no? Maybe I'm wrong."

"That's right, coniferous! Sorry, my mistake."

Sarah looked tired, and Daphne caught the change in her daughter's expression.

"Are you alright?"

Sarah didn't want to give away anything. She answered quickly. "Yeah, I'm grand. Just a bit tired from all the socialising."

Daphne seemed puzzled. Her bright, chirpy tone was at odds with the downbeat atmosphere around the table.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, absolutely!" Sarah replied.

"Ok, so, just take it easy today."

Charlie, not noticing the tension in the room, decided to put on some black puddings. He hummed along to an old David Bowie song, 'Changes,' which played through the Bluetooth speaker.

"Still don't know what I waaaas waitin' for,
And my time waaaas runnin' wild,
A million dead end streets—
And every time I thought I'd got it maaaade,
It seemed the taste—was not so sweet!"

Charlie tried to strike up a conversation, oblivious to the tension.

"Do you have any plans for today, girls?"

Sarah stalled for a moment, then answered authoritatively, "We'll think of something. I'm sure there's plenty to do."

"Don't go away yet, anyway. These puddings will be ready in a minute."

The chorus to the song began, and Charlie took it as his cue.

"Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes,
Turn and face the strange,
Ch-ch-changes,
Don't want to be a richer man,

Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes,
Turn and face the strange,
Ch-ch-changes,
There's gonna have to be a different man,
Time may change me,
But I can't trace time!"

Kate and Sarah sat down at the table and took out their phones. They knew it would be best to keep their heads down and avoid too many questions about the previous night. The smell of the fry, now stifled by the heat in the room, made the air feel thick. Daphne had had enough.

"Charlie, can you open the window? I can't breathe in here."

He opened the window, but as he did, the chorus from another song on his playlist sprang into action.

"There's a starman waiting in the sky,
He'd like to come and meet us,
But he thinks he'd blow our minds!
There's a starman waiting in the sky,
He's told us not to blow it,
'Cause he knows it's all worthwhile!
He told me,
Let the children lose it,
Let the children use it,
Let all the children boogie!"

Charlie placed the puddings on a plate and brought them over to the table.

"Now, everyone! Here's the puddings. Tuck in, take as many as you like!"

"I might save a couple for Peter," Daphne replied.

"Oh, where is he?"

"He's just working on a new novel."

Kate raised an eyebrow in surprise. Peter was only about 20 years old. What business did he have writing a novel?

Sarah had already read Kate's mind and answered her before she could ask.

"Peter is very intelligent and loves to keep himself busy. He can be a bit of fun, but he's actually very sensitive underneath it all. People sometimes take him the wrong way. We have to protect him."

Kate was taken aback. What kind of 20-year-old wakes up and decides to write a novel? Most people her age were caught up in the usual distractions.

"Someone call him down before his food goes cold," Charlie prompted calmly.

"I'll do it," Sarah replied.

She pushed her chair back, stood, and walked to the foot of the stairs. Just as she was about to call his name, she noticed their black-and-tan terrier, Wooster, vomiting on the tiled floor.

"Wooster!"

Sarah ran over to the dog, whose mouth had traces of white powder. Her heart dropped. Could it really be what she thought? Was there more?

"Sarah, is your brother coming down yet?"

Daphne's voice broke her out of her thoughts.

"Um, yeah. He's just putting Sudocrem on a cut on his face," Sarah lied quickly.

Where had it come from? What if her parents found out that cocaine was in the house? She rushed upstairs to her room, trying to collect herself. She opened Kate's bag and rooted through it. Inside, she found three sandwich bags containing cocaine. One bag was open, and some of the powder had spilled onto the floor. It must have been Wooster.

"Sarah?" Peter's voice startled her.

"Hi, Peter. Is that your bag?" he asked, sounding concerned.

Had he seen it? Did he know what was inside? Sarah's heart raced. He would flip if he found out.

"No, uh, it's Kate's," she muttered, hoping her voice didn't give her away.

Peter seemed unsure but didn't press the issue.

"Oh, right. Where did ye go last night? Ye weren't back until all hours."

"I was just showing her around the area. Some of the good places to walk," Sarah answered quickly.

"Okay, so," Peter replied, sounding skeptical.

"Have you had your breakfast yet? I'm going to the kitchen now."

"Yeah, I'm finished. I'm just trying to sort something out here for Kate."

"No bother, see you in a minute."

Peter walked off toward the kitchen. Sarah exhaled slowly. She had dodged a bullet, but the mess still remained. What was she going to do about this? Kate had come here to fix her life, but what damage was her old friend going to bring into their home? Hadn't she learned her lesson before she arrived?

"Sarah, are you coming back?"

Sarah snapped back to reality at her mother's call.

"Sarah?"

"Oh, sorry! Coming now!" she replied, scrambling to the kitchen.

She quickly told her mother about the dog.

"Well, we'll have to take him to the vet," Daphne said, looking concerned.

"Oh, no, I'll just clean it up and give him fresh water. There's, um, an opened chocolate bar on the floor. I don't know how it got there."

"That could poison him!"

"I'll give him plenty of water," Sarah said, hoping to avoid further questioning.

As she walked back to the table, she gave Kate a brief, reproachful look. Kate, of course, knew exactly why the dog had vomited. Luckily for her, it was subtle enough for the rest of the family to miss.

"Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly," Peter said suddenly, catching everyone's attention.

Sarah froze. Did he know?

"It's a Bobby Kennedy quote," he added, glancing at his father.

"Very interesting! Had it not been for his assassination in 1968, I'd say he would've run against Nixon," Charlie said.

Sarah let out a small, almost imperceptible sigh of relief. Peter was so perceptive, but not in the way she feared.

The sun poured through the windows, making everything feel warm and bright, a stark contrast to the overcast, dreary weather from the day before. Now was the time to leave.

"We're going to head outside. We won't leave the house, though. I might just show Kate the pony. I didn't get to last night, what with the dark."

Daphne smiled at the idea.

"Okay, and be sure to check the water! They'll need to be fed soon."

Sarah nodded at Kate. It was time to get outside for a "chat."

The clear blue sky painted a different picture than the miserable, gray clouds of the previous day. Sarah and Kate leaned against the custard-colored wooden fence of the paddock. A dark brown pony trotted over, snorting and swishing its tail before lowering its head to nibble at the blades of fresh grass. The ground was soft and uneven, thick with old-fashioned grass types like cocksfoot and timothy. The corner of the paddock, where the feed bucket and gate were, had been worn down and was now muddy.

Sarah was far less relaxed than the pony.

"Kate," Sarah began, her voice low and serious. "The dog got sick because he found your stash. We need to get rid of it. You need to get off it."

Kate's face paled. "But, but I can't."

She lowered her voice to avoid being overheard.

"I thought that after last night, after everything, you had no more of it."

Sarah's anger was barely contained. "I can't just give up overnight. It doesn't work like that."

"Why did you bring it here?" Sarah shot back, frustration building. "You came here to get away from this! What's your problem, Kate? Stop."

Kate looked down at her feet. She was frustrated, but deep down, sadness swept through her. Sarah could see it in her eyes. She didn't want her old friend to continue down this path.

A few moments passed. The only sound was the gentle breeze rustling the leaves of the nearby trees.

"Look, Sarah," Kate said softly, her voice cracking. "I know why I'm here. I promise to try my best."

Sarah studied Kate's eyes, searching for sincerity. It was difficult to see past the tears building up in her friend's eyes, but she believed her.

"Can you?" Sarah asked gently.

"I will. I must," Kate replied, her voice barely a whisper.

Kate's eyes welled up. She clutched her head, her fringe falling across her face as the tears spilled down her cheeks. She couldn't stop herself.

Sarah stepped forward, pulling Kate into a tight hug. Unlike the relief they had shared the previous night, this hug was filled with the weight of everything unsaid, everything Kate was struggling with.

"It's okay, it's okay. We'll get through this," Sarah whispered.

Kate was overwhelmed, unable to speak. She just held on tight, feeling something she had never felt before—true compassion.

“We?” Kate sobbed. “No. I don’t deserve that. I’m not good enough for your help.”

Sarah pulled back slightly, but kept her hands on Kate’s shoulders, looking her square in the eyes.

“You do,” Sarah said firmly. “You’re my friend.”

As if on cue, a robin landed on the grass beside them, chirping as it hopped around in search of worms. It seemed to be oblivious to the heaviness in the air, a tiny symbol of hope amidst the uncertainty.

4

It was a nice, warm Sunday morning on the June bank holiday. The weather was perfect for the 'jobs,' or the chores that had to be done to maintain the 'ranch.' The pony, which had spent some time in the heavily used paddock, was quite dirty. At 25 degrees Celsius, it was time for a good hose down. Daphne was outside, tending to the flowers. She decided to leave the task of washing the pony to the girls, knowing it would be a valuable experience for them.

"Sarah, Sarah," she called.

Sarah left the house and walked over to her.

"Why don't you ask Kate to help you wash the pony? I think it would be good for her to spend some time with the animals."

"I agree," Sarah replied. "I'll call her."

Sarah returned to the house, walking briskly. If Kate was going to start fresh, it was time to get her outside and doing something constructive.

"Kate, come outside quick, we're washing the pony!" Sarah called.

There was no response.

"Kate!" Sarah called louder.

Still, nothing.

"Oh no," Sarah mumbled to herself, feeling a little worried. Had Kate regressed again?

Sarah entered the spare bedroom and found Kate fast asleep.

"Wakey, wakey!" she called.

Kate stirred, slowly opening her eyes.

"What?"

"Get up, we're going to have a fun day today!"

"Uh, give me a minute, I'm wrecked," Kate groaned.

"Only a minute. Come on, up!"

It was a slow start, but Kate eventually sat up, reached for her watch, and got dressed. Her soft, stripy pyjamas were a stark contrast to how she had looked the previous morning. She followed Sarah outside. The sun was bright, and the air was intensely humid, which was something she hadn't quite experienced yet this year.

The wrens and goldfinches flitted from branch to branch, their cheerful songs filling the air. It was one of those moments where nature could be fully appreciated.

"Over here," Sarah called.

The pony, wearing a head collar, was tied to the wall as usual. Sarah had attached a hose to a nearby tap and brought two buckets, each containing a sponge. The pony was long overdue for a wash, and no doubt would feel much better afterward. The main issue was sweat and dried mud, which had built up in her coat. There were streaks of mud in her mane and above her eyes, which only added to the irritation.

"I'll turn on the tap," Sarah said, excitedly.

The cold water rushed through the hose. The dry concrete ground began to soak it up, and a small puddle began to form.

"What's the pony's name?" Kate asked, genuinely curious.

"Evita," Sarah answered.

"Evita? That's unusual, but nice."

"Well, her registered name is TFX Evita Thousand, so we just call her Evita."

"Oh, right. Why is the name so long? Why not something simpler?"

Kate was puzzled.

"Evita's a competition pony. She takes part in equine events at agricultural shows in Dublin and the UK."

"Wait, is that one of those dress-up competitions you see the Queen attending?"

Sarah hesitated. The question caught her off guard, and she had to think for a moment.

"Well, not exactly... I'd say it's just something we do as a family."

Sarah almost added "it's definitely better than other things," but stopped, considering Kate's situation.

"Is this how you spend your time?" Kate asked, her tone softening.

"I suppose it is. It's not overly exciting, but I think it's good for the mind."

Kate thought for a moment. "Yeah, I suppose it is," she agreed, quietly.

Kate was beginning to feel like she was discovering a new way of spending her time. The pony was much calmer than she had expected. In her mind, horses were supposed to be fiery and easily startled.

"Why is she so calm? Aren't horses supposed to be easily excited?"

"Well, they can be, especially the younger ones or warmbloods. Evita here is 11 years old. She's used to this. She's been to practically every show in the country. Horses adapt and learn to trust their owners. It's about more than just food and water. Taking care of their hygiene, too, sends a positive message."

"Oh," Kate said, surprised. "I've never heard of anything

like that before."

"Have you ever seen *The Horse Whisperer* with Robert Redford?"

"Who's Robert Redford?"

Sarah was momentarily taken aback.

"To be honest, I'm not too sure myself. My dad and brother say he's a famous actor. He was in a well-known Western movie in the 1960s. Scarlett Johansson's in it, too."

Kate's eyes lit up. "Scarlett Johansson? Now I know her!"

Sarah smiled, relieved. "She was very young in it, though, before she became a big star."

"Can we watch it?" Kate asked, her excitement evident.

Sarah was surprised but pleased. It seemed like things were shifting. Perhaps Kate was starting to open up, just a little.

As the soapy water ran down the pony's legs, Kate helped brush its mane. Sarah judged the job complete.

"I think we're done now. I'll let her back into the field."

Sarah unclipped the lead rope from the wall and replaced it with another to guide Evita back. The pony gave a shake, flinging droplets of water off her back. The sun was already starting to dry her.

Sarah led her back into the field. Evita eagerly pulled her head away, trying to get to the fresh grass beyond. Sarah struggled for a moment before Evita dashed away, galloping toward the bottom of the field, kicking her legs as she ran. The hot sun was already drying her, but Evita would likely be back at the gate for a drink soon.

"I'm flipping roasting," Sarah muttered, wiping her brow.

"Me too. I haven't felt heat like this since I was in Ibiza last year," Kate remarked.

Sarah, having never been to Ibiza, simply nodded.

"If you want some ice cream, we have vanilla in the fridge. We've got strawberries too."

"I'd love some! Thanks!"

Charlie walked over, greeting them with a smile.

"Mass is at 1 o'clock if you want to get ready."

Kate froze. Mass? She wasn't ready for that. She didn't feel like she could face it, but how could she explain that without offending Sarah's father?

"I'm okay, thanks. I don't know any of the words," Kate said, quietly.

"Ah, don't worry about it," Charlie replied, before adding, "It's not the Latin Mass!"

Kate felt a wave of relief wash over her, only to be replaced by a slight dread. What was the Latin Mass?

Sarah quickly stepped in to help. "She's still settling in. I don't think she's ready for that yet, Dad."

Charlie nodded and accepted her assessment. "Alright, no bother!"

He returned to the house to make tea. After all, it might be 25 degrees outside, but it wasn't Irish if you didn't have a cup of tea!

Peter had finished weeding the garden. Sweat dripped down his face, and he wiped it away with a sheet of kitchen paper. The garden, although full of wildflowers like Alkanets, Asters, Bellflowers, and Bluebells, looked vibrant and full of life.

He took off his gloves and walked to a shaded windowsill, where he kept a bottle of water. Wiping his face again, he took a long drink.

"Hello, how are ye getting on?" he called, noticing Sarah and Kate.

"Good, thanks," Kate replied.

"We've just washed Evita," Sarah said with a smile.

"Cool. This heat is something else, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is. Kate and I were going to get some ice cream. Would you like some?"

"What kind is it?"

"Vanilla, and we have strawberries and raspberries to go with it."

"Count me in! Thanks a mil!"

Peter grabbed his tools and walked over to the shed to put them away. On the way back, he noticed a bag on the ground. It was the same one he had seen Sarah with earlier. Curiosity sparked in him, but he decided not to ask. After all, it could just be a bag for carrying things.

Inside the house, Sarah was preparing the bowls and spoons.

"We have regular ice cream and then we have some artisan stuff. Which one do you think is better?"

"Whatever you want. I'm not bothered," Kate responded.

It was funny, considering the fuss she had made earlier.

"I think I'll use the regular one for now, but we have an ice cream maker. We could make some from scratch, if you like."

"Sure! Are you an ice cream expert?"

"Not really," Sarah laughed. "I just learned from Wikihow and YouTube during the pandemic. It's one of the best skills I've picked up."

"I'd love to help with that. It sounds fun!" Kate said, surprising herself.

Just a week ago, Kate would have thought making ice cream at home was beneath her. But now, it felt different. Maybe these simple tasks, though mundane to a party-focused lifestyle, were actually meaningful.

Sarah, too, was beginning to see things differently. She had been shaped by her experiences, and Kate by hers. Yet, Sarah remembered the words of Martha Robinson: "The greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions, and not upon our circumstances."

Sarah wondered if Martha Robinson would agree with this particular situation.

5

A gentle breeze blew across the field. The portable Bluetooth speaker was playing classic music, audible across several acres.

“Ziggy played guitar,
Jamming good with Weird and Gilly,
And the Spiders from Mars,
He played it left hand,
But made it too far,
Became the special man,
Then we were Ziggy's band!”

It was Charlie and Peter, playing another David Bowie song from the 1970s as they painted the shed in the evening sun. The galvanised sheets, badly weathered by time, needed a few coats of protective paint to freshen them up and ensure their longevity. They enjoyed doing tasks like these. It was a core part of their strong father-son relationship. Although they had to remain grounded, it was important to engage in honest, straightforward work that made them happy.

Peter had put together a ‘to-do’ list for the week. He had a committee meeting for an agricultural society, planned to apply rust treatment to their vintage David Brown tractor, and intended to work on his poetry. He was cautious about

who he spent time with and spoke to. He thought of the famous philosopher Plato, who once said, "People are like dirt. They can either nourish you and help you as a person, or they can stunt your growth and make you wilt and die."

Peter admired Plato. He had read his famous, though dated, work *The Republic*, finding it an insightful source of perspective-altering wisdom. Plato believed that much of our lives go wrong because we fail to give ourselves enough time to think carefully about our plans, ending up with the wrong values, careers, and relationships. He sought to bring order and clarity to our minds. Aristotle, on the other hand, gave Peter a deeper sense of internal meaning. "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all," was a quote that inspired Peter to pursue his various interests.

"Would you like a can of Coke?" Charlie asked.

He had become thirsty quite quickly, hoping for a break. The implication was that he too would enjoy a Coke.

"Yes, please, I'll get it," Peter responded enthusiastically, happy to take the task off his father's hands.

Peter went inside to fetch the drinks. Sarah and Kate were having ice cream. Sarah had added strawberries to hers, while Kate had raspberries. Kate had almost convinced Sarah to switch, but Sarah preferred the sweeter taste of strawberries. They turned to see who had entered.

"Don't worry, I'm just grabbing a couple of cans of Coca-Cola for Dad and me," Peter said casually, avoiding unnecessary small talk.

"Do you want your ice cream?" Sarah asked.

She had hoped to finish the current batch of vanilla ice cream before starting her own homemade version.

"I'll have some later," Peter replied. "I just have to finish painting with Dad. He might have some too."

He opened the fridge, pulling the cans from the cardboard pack. He wasn't fully used to the thinner, taller 330ml cans

from Europe that had recently appeared in Ireland. Little details like this mattered to him, even if they didn't seem important to others.

After handing his father the Coke, Peter thought about why Kate was staying with them that summer. He hadn't received a full explanation.

"Dad, why is Kate staying with us?"

"Well, Peter, Sarah offered," Charlie replied.

"Right, but she hasn't seen her in years."

Charlie hesitated, unsure how much to reveal. "Yes, that's why."

Peter didn't fully buy the answer but decided to leave it at that for now.

"Anyway, I was going to apply some rust treatment to the David Brown."

"That sounds good. Do it when you're ready," Charlie replied, genuinely interested in what his son chose to do with his time.

"I saw an article in a vintage magazine saying they're becoming rare. We should hold on to it for a while," Peter told him.

"That's a great idea," Charlie responded, happy to hear his son's thoughts.

Charlie was relieved that Peter had no interest in more destructive activities. If only Peter knew, he thought, what was really going on with Kate.

"That was delicious ice cream," Kate remarked.

"Yeah," Sarah agreed. "It's just a solid mix of ingredients. Some of them try to water it down with... well, you know."

Sarah hesitated before almost saying "vegan," unsure whether Kate might be one of them.

"I know what you mean," Kate said, understanding the implication.

"I'm just not keen on raspberries," Sarah said. "I have a

sweet tooth. Raspberries just don't do it for me."

"Fair enough," Kate replied.

"By the way, we have Disney Plus. Want to see what's on it?"

"Yeah, I'd love to! I didn't know you had it!"

Sarah smiled. Of course they did—Disney Plus was all about family-friendly content. Though it also offered darker, gritty films like *Taken*, which sat next to *Monsters, Inc.* in the listings. After all, *Taken* told the story of a loving father who did whatever it took to save his daughter, even if it meant a bit of brutal action. It had a strong family message, right? Maybe even more so than *Toy Story*, with its surprisingly violent moments.

Kate underestimated the technological setup at the O'Donnell-Smiths. They had a flatscreen TV with an Xbox to run the Disney Plus app. Sarah also had an iPhone and loved sharing memes with Kate through Airdrop. It was never too early to laugh at photos of Shrek saying something funny about simple things, like updating a phone.

Meanwhile, rabbits hopped across the garden, pausing now and then to sniff the air. Their ears twitched, rotating like satellites, gathering information. As they hopped away into the ditches, butterflies in purple and orange fluttered overhead, visiting flowers along the way. In the distance, Daphne emerged, watering her flowers and vegetables. She turned the hose towards two young saplings, quenching their thirst.

Suddenly, the water stopped flowing. Daphne frowned, frustrated. Had the pipe disconnected? Would she have to walk all the way back to the wall to fix it, only for it to burst again when she returned?

Putting down the hose, she retraced her steps. The pipe had folded over itself, knotted. "There we go," she muttered, sorting it out.

But the water still wouldn't flow. She inspected the pipe further, finding another knot. Despite fixing it, the water still wasn't coming through. Something wasn't right.

She trudged towards the wall to investigate. Sure enough, the pipe had detached, spraying water everywhere. Luckily, they had a well for water; otherwise, she feared they'd have to deal with Irish Water's officials.

Daphne sighed. Why did this always happen on the hottest days? Her sun hat couldn't protect her from the intense heat. Were those rabbits plotting against her?

As she fiddled with the hose's adapter, two jackdaws landed nearby. The bored birds started playing with the recycling bin, trying to open the lid with their claws.

Finally, Daphne managed to fix the hose. She turned around to see the jackdaws tipping the bin over, spilling plastic bottles and wrappers everywhere.

"Bastards!" she muttered.

What had started as a peaceful task of watering flowers had turned into a series of frustrations. She glanced over at Charlie and Peter, who had resumed their work on the shed. Despite their lack of skill, they were making good progress. Their quick wit made up for their practical difficulties.

The Bluetooth speaker had been switched to a new song, this time by Johnny Cash and his friends Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson, and Willie Nelson.

"I was a highwayman,
Along the coach roads I did ride,
With sword and pistol by my side,
Many a young maid lost her baubles to my trade,
Many a soldier shed his lifeblood on my blade,
The bastards hung me in the spring of '25,
But I am still alive!"

Charlie and Peter enjoyed talking about the stories behind songs—not just their meanings, but the reasons they were

written and the circumstances surrounding them.

"You know, I don't think Johnny Cash wrote that one," Charlie said.

"Really? I thought he wrote all his own songs," Peter replied, surprised.

"It was written by Jimmy Webb, a famous composer. He was a heavy drinker, but in his haze, he came up with the idea. It's a powerful song—it spans four incarnations of the same soul: as a highwayman, sailor, construction worker on the Hoover Dam, and finally a starship captain," Charlie explained.

"Wow, I didn't know that!" Peter said.

"Glen Campbell also did a version in 1979."

"Glen Campbell? The guy who sings *Wichita Lineman*?"

"That's him. I am a lineman for the county!"

"And I drive the main roads..."

They sang together, enjoying the music as they worked.

"Searching in the sun for another overload!"

"I hear you singing in the wires..."

"I can hear you through the whine..."

"And the Wichita Lineman..."

Is still on the line..."

Peter thought for a moment. "He was some singer!"

"Indeed," Charlie agreed. "He had some great songs. *Gentle on My Mind* is a classic."

"Don't forget *Rhinestone Cowboy*!"

"Ah, couldn't forget that one. It's a great song for any aspiring politician."

They laughed and continued to sing along. Peter queued up *Rhinestone Cowboy* on the Bluetooth speaker.

"There's been a load of compromising,
On the road to my horizon,
But I'm gonna be where the lights are shinin' on me...
Like a rhinestone cowboy!

Riding out on a horse in a star-spangled rodeo!"

They finished painting the galvanised sheets, though the tips were difficult to cover. The ridges made it challenging. Most brushes were too wide, and the thinner ones weren't effective for the surface. It seemed like a "Catch-22," one of those frustrating situations. Still, music had a soothing effect that kept them calm as they worked.

"Ah, Jesus," Charlie muttered, wiping sweat from his brow. "I can't stand this heat. Want to take another break?"

"Yeah, no problem," Peter replied, happy to oblige.

"Another can of Coke?" Charlie asked.

Peter, ever the obliging son, was happy to grab a drink for his father. He was the type of person the world needed more of. Charlie appreciated this, and he and Sarah had worked hard to guide Peter's development.

Despite everything, Charlie knew the value of power, even if academic types and idealists dismissed it. Peter, for example, was a fan of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy on the *Will to Power*. Nietzsche had written in *Beyond Good and Evil* that "life itself is will to power," suggesting that even survival comes second to the drive for power. Charlie and Peter both agreed that power came with responsibility—something they both knew well.

6

“Would you like to get started on the David Brown? The sun’s still out and we won’t be having lunch for another bit,” suggested Charlie to Peter.

Peter checked the time on his phone. It was still early yet.

“I’ll do that, now.”

Peter was the young fella to go to if you needed the right piece or process for something sussed. He had bought a tin of rust converter online. It was painted over rusty surfaces with a paintbrush, and would then react with the rust to create a new compound – iron tannate. He had debated whether to use rust converter or rust remover on the tractor. For dilemmas such as this, he frequented online forums and YouTube videos. He had learned that rust remover was only appropriate for indoor surfaces, such as steel door hinges in sheds. If he had applied it to the David Brown, it would have rusted over again by the following morning. He had been planning to restore the paint on the tractor for quite some time now. A charming model 1412, its white and black upper half provided a regal contrast against its red-painted engine, cab steps, and wheels. Likewise, the tall, bright red front grille harboured a majestic grace, the slats standing as straight and tense as guitar strings. When it drove on the

road, it possessed a certain magnetism that induced people to grab their smartphones and take lots of photos. The cab itself was thin and had tall windows. The side windows resembled slightly disjointed trapezoids, but didn't most cabs of 1970s tractors look the same?

Dead leaves and sticks had found their way through the various joints and flat surfaces on the vehicle, which had to be removed before any work could be done. Being a ridiculously monotonous job, the power of water was again called into action. Charlie had recently purchased a bright yellow, petrol-powered power washer from a well-known garden store franchise nearby. You could be forgiven for mistaking it for a lawnmower, due to its mid-centred engine. On the top of its body, where the handlebar joined it, read '3000 PSI.' Now that was real power!

Peter, grabbing the handlebar with one hand and the hose with the other, dragged it over from the old garage adjacent to the house, over to the shed, where the imposing David Brown lay idle. Leaving the power washer by the front left wheel, he ventured into the darkness at the back of the shed, where a red, plastic petrol can sat, gathering a yucky variety of webs, dust, and grime. As he picked it up, bits of dirt and straw stuck to the tips of his fingers.

Having opened the can, the fuel cap on the machine, and filled it up to the 'MAXIMUM' marker, he turned on the washer, which roared into life. It made that typical, loud, monotonous 'hum' that we associate with machines of that nature. What would Greta Thunberg make of the whole thing? All he was focused on at this stage, though, was cleaning up the classy ol' tractor. Sure, he was an environmentalist, but not militant. He had done much more, no matter how small, for the environment than any self-righteous 'progressive' had done on Twitter. The first thing they should do, he believed, was put their heads down and

trust in God.

Adjusting the angle of the nozzle, he almost lost control of the washer completely. Whoops! He obviously hadn't used it in a while.

He turned his attention to the joints between the wheels. They had gathered all sorts of sticks, twigs, small clumps of hay and straw, not to mention dried-out grease that had turned into a repugnant form of grime that was possibly fathomable. The high pressure of the water ejected chips of loose paint into the air from the surface. Furthermore, the spiders had just been put out of a home due to his indiscriminate water blasting of the general area. The spiders needed their own D.D Sheehan, the famous Land Leaguer and late Irish UK Member of Parliament from Kanturk. How did 'D.D Spider' sound? Cornier names had been thought of in the past.

There was a lot of work to be done. The otherwise beautiful swash of water droplets revealed a much more menacing picture of a rust-ridden tractor. It pervaded the framework – and was of such a pernicious nature that it could turn into immutable corrosion.

"Ah, Jesus," balked Peter. "This is going to be some job, altogether!"

Nevertheless, he enjoyed what he was doing and continued to labour at it for the best part of twenty minutes – no airlocks, no fuss. In from the shade, life was good.

However, as he was attempting to clean an area near the cab, he aimed the hose at one of the lower cab windows, positioned at the height of the 'bonnet.' A 'crunch' sound sent jitters down his spine. The window had cracked from the intense pressure of the water.

"Oh, shit!"

Peter rushed over to the power washer's engine and turned it off. His heart raced, and his breathing pattern had

consequentially become disrupted. He slipped on a wet patch on the concrete surface, almost falling as a result.

"For fuck's sake! Why does something always go wrong?"

He had fallen victim to Murphy's Law. Like Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War*, it was inevitable. Peter dwelled a lot on things that went wrong. He could be very hard on himself.

"I might as well be flipping Dougal. At least some things went right for him from time to time."

Craggy Island would've probably been a more realistic description of the yard at home.

"All I'm trying to do is fix the tractor, and now I've probably set myself back a hundred quid plus postage!"

Peter whipped his iPhone out of his pants pocket and Googled replacement cab windows for the David Brown. Comparing a couple of different websites, he found the specific piece for £70 Sterling, costing an additional £20 Sterling for delivery. Finding an exchange rate converter online, he calculated that it would cost him €105 to get his hands on it. This became a momentary source of exasperation, as he had hoped to buy a nice wool-tweed country jacket for approximately the same amount online.

"Damn you, opportunity cost! I'll never get that fecking jacket over the fucking cab window!"

He packed up the power washer, frustrated, and retired to the house for a cup of tea.

Peter nervously informed his father of the damage that had been sustained by the tractor.

"Hi, Dad."

"How are ya getting on, son?"

Peter stalled for a moment as he broke the news.

"I was trying to clear off the gunk from the tractor with the power washer before I applied the rust converter, and I accidentally cracked one of the lower cab windows from the force of the water."

Charlie held his breath and looked surprised. Despite this, he was not angry.

"That's something else, don't worry, though. Things like this happen."

He was a very understanding father. This came as a relief to Peter.

"Well, look. Obviously, I'm sorry. I clearly didn't intend to break it. I had trouble adjusting the pressure and tilting the angle of the nozzle. I messed it up."

Charlie thought of the money involved in repairing it.

"Do you know how much a replacement will cost?"

"Ya, I looked it up. We can get a replacement piece for €105, including postage."

"Sure, that's grand – no big deal!"

Peter wished to stay active.

"I might just head back out and start applying the rust converter to the bits I washed."

"Ya, do. There's a movie on later, if you want to come back in to watch it. I don't think we can do Mass today on account of Kate being here. I'll also have dinner ready," Charlie added nimbly.

Perhaps a break from Mass was for the best. For Peter, the problem wasn't Mass itself, but there were always a couple of characters present that would make him feel slightly disjointed afterward. Mrs. O'Connor was one such personality. Although she knew Peter pretty well, she would act rather nosily into changes, with the intention of spilling it to everyone else, privately criticising everything they did. She could easily pick up contradictions in voice, face, and manner, which could be shown in rapid succession if landed with an intentionally tricky question – and she could easily rotate through half a dozen moods, several times each, in the space of five minutes. When she met him, she would act surprised (albeit insincerely), though it was impossible to

help suspecting, based on past experiences, that she had come for the express purpose of extracting information and using it to gossip about you behind your back.

This was juxtaposed against others, such as Mrs. Murphy, an octogenarian who was an odd mixture of rusty parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of 50 years of marriage made her husband still lacking sufficient knowledge of her character. On a zimmer-frame, she would travel across the back of the church at the beginning of Mass, sometimes almost colliding with the altar boys.

“Watch it,” she would tell them, oblivious to the fact that the Mass had started. The new boys could get a fright, but the veterans would laugh with her about it, exchanging a cheeky smile. She was not bad-humoured, but her caustic style and quick wit could upset relative strangers and cause outrage in the age of political correctness. She depended on her aforementioned husband to get to and from the church, and like all husbands, he took his orders from her. He sought to keep a low profile, however, it was doubtful to many of those who best knew the easiness of his temper, exactly how he put up with it. With things like divorce around today, what sense did it make? These particular people were part of one of several dying breeds.

Peter felt the same about himself and his family. Had their time passed? Like the Axis leader Benito Mussolini and his ‘Italian Social Republic’ of 1943, it seemed as if they were on the retreat from the prevailing attitudes and culture of society. It wasn’t a problem to do with complacency, but instead a battle for relevance – and they were losing it, badly. He decried the loud calls for ‘diversity’ when his way of life was slipping away from him with every passing day.

Then there was the Stations of the Cross. Spread out across the walls of the church, typically between the stained-glass windows, a distinctive marker of a Roman Catholic church,

he was reminded of the early pages of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*:

"Every picture told a story, mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting; as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings, when she chanced to be in good humour..."

Having sacrificed yet more of his time to reflection, as he did on a daily basis, Peter sat down and opened his phone, researching poetry techniques. Again, he thought of Mussolini, who was renowned for his poetry and had written a novel, once upon a time. His sensitive side was a core element to his macho bravado, depicting him as a man of careful thought and reflection – a man who could relate to others. It was his shamelessly histrionic personality that amplified this though, a trait which poor old Peter lacked for the time being. Maybe it was for the better, as craving to be the centre of attention appeared to be something that psychologists associated with deep-seated insecurity. He had potential, though. In the same way that with great power comes great responsibility, it is no secret that great creatives have gone on to become great Strongmen. People like that pursued avenues such as politics, the stage, and the media – where they could soon become widely known and admired and were often obsessed with their own physical appearance. That and megalomania, which Nietzsche deemed to be a prerequisite for life.

Peter sometimes wondered if he could benefit from embracing Mussolini's real charm – that famous 'fascino,' possessing that untamed, unpredictable sensitivity, but with caution and lack of conventional prejudices. It had been mooted in several articles that if Mussolini were around today, he would've been identified as having Asperger's. Perhaps geniuses were misunderstood? Don't get us started

on Hitler or Stalin. After all, a 2008 Pentagon report had dubbed Putin as such.

Kate trudged slowly to the 'TV room'. Following Sarah, she couldn't stop thinking about what had happened to her own mother. Would things have been different if it hadn't been for her death? It was a question that had relentlessly haunted her in recent days, but she hadn't made it known to the O'Donnell-Smiths.

One of the cushions from the couch lay on the floor. One of the terriers had been here and had stretched out on the couch. Randomly misplaced cushions was its signature, not too dissimilar to 'Il Tornado' in *Pink Panther 2*, starring Steve Martin. The curtains were open, tied back by silk knots. The sandy colour of the curtains themselves, complementing the white radiator below the sill. The sun shone through the large, double-glazed front window, making the glass ornaments on the window sill glisten in response. Outside, she could see the lovely shades of green from the various breeds of trees contrast against the clear, blue sky. Ground Elders lined the ditch that ran along the equine sand arena. The sporadic daisy had set up camp on the areas of grass right outside the front of the house. She was not accustomed to such a view, yet slowly, but surely, she was developing an affection for this rural scenery.

"Let's see what's on Disney Plus," Sarah mooted, interrupting Kate's train of thought. It was probably for the best. Kate snapped back into the present moment.

"Ya, good idea," she acknowledged.

They scrolled through the movie options. There were Marvel movies, Pixar movies, Star Wars movies, and classic movies. Sometimes, a major problem with a large choice of films is that it takes a considerable chunk of time to choose, and arguments can ensue regarding film selection. It could even happen that ultimately, no movie would be watched. As

they say in *Fair City*, “Oh, no, this is a noightmaaare!”

In the end, they settled on *Thor: Ragnarok*. The film’s introduction, they believed, was amusing, and subsequently thought it warranted seeing it again. They especially loved the theme song, Led Zeppelin’s ‘Immigrant Song’. As a product of their generation, this was where they first heard the iconic tune:

“Ah-ah, ah!

Ah-ah, ah!

We come from the land of the ice and snow,
From the midnight sun where the hot springs flooww!”

Sarah’s father initially saw Chris Hemsworth as the most annoying man on earth, but had mellowed out in his hostility towards him over the years. As long as it wasn’t Dr. Strange doing that weird circle thing with his hands, he didn’t mind all too much anymore.

“I like these old Thor movies more,” Kate said.

“Ya, same here. I just don’t think the new reboot is quite as funny,” Sarah added in agreement.

A cabinet containing a box of sweets stood adjacent to the TV. Sarah reached over to it, grabbing a box of Celebrations. She liked the Wispas in particular. After pocketing a few of the chocolates, she offered the box to Kate.

“I’m okay, thanks.”

As you can probably tell by now, Kate had a penchant for turning down benevolent offers. Was she merely not interested in the sweets, in the sense that she didn’t have the appetite for them, or was it something more personality-driven?

“Alright,” Sarah replied. The tone of her voice implied, however, that not all was necessarily ‘alright.’

7

The movie finished, and it was now time for dinner. Daphne called them for their supper.

"Girls! Dinner!"

The last couple of days had been more easy-going for Kate, although she still felt as if she was on an alien planet. Nevertheless, the food was alright. Tonight's meal was spaghetti bolognese. The servings of meat were very generous, as Kate was used to only a trickle of mince with the same meal in town. Usually, it was pasta and sauce with a teaser of meat. *When is your mince meat day?* They sat down at the kitchen table.

Peter and Charlie entered the house. They had been working on the tractor outside. Having ignored the cracked cab window for the moment, the rest of the tractor had been hosed down with the bright yellow pressure washer and given a good dosing of rust converter. The iron tannate solution produced a black colour on the surface in the space of a couple of hours. It wasn't much of a David Brown anymore, but instead a 'David Black.'

"Now," Charlie announced. "We have that done!"

Peter expressed a more relieved than excited outlook.

"Thank God! I thought it was game over after the cab

window.”

Daphne looked confused.

“What cab window?”

Oh, no. Here we go again...

“Peter had difficulty with the nozzle of the power washer and accidentally cracked a lower cab window. Don’t worry, though, the replacement piece is actually very cheap.”

In fairness to Charlie, he had a kindly and unassuming nature, always harbouring a ‘don’t cry over spilt milk’ and realistic approach to life. Sarah burst out laughing.

“I’d like to see you try,” Peter exclaimed defensively.

“I will,” she replied, intentionally trying to wind him up.

“I might throw on the news, there,” Charlie announced. Nobody objected or lay claim to use of the television, and he subsequently proceeded.

Aengus from RTE News was presenting the night’s programme. To all, it seemed that the world had never been the same since the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic several years back, and it was very likely to remain so for a considerable time to come. Nothing good could come out of the presenter’s mouth. Austerity here, floods there, more droning from disinterested politicians; when was it ever going to end? In some ways, Charlie was a junkie for bad news; he fed on the anxiety and drama that the world had in store. Likewise, Peter would see reports and cringe at what he perceived to be the gross stupidity of the general population.

“Having a PhD doesn’t mean you’re not fucking retarded,” he would say – and he was right. He tended to avoid the news, as it would cause him to rant about people’s nonsensical antics.

“These airy-fairy academics have no notion of the difference between academia and intelligence,” would be another quip.

"Money and power are what matters in life!"

Despite this, he joined his father in his viewing of that evening's news, but his attention drifted back and forth between the latest reports and his various 'next big ideas.' He couldn't quite decide which particular thing to dedicate his attention to that evening. Would it be a poem, a screenplay, or the next great business empire?

He thought of Quentin Tarantino, one of his favourite movie directors of all time. What would Tarantino do, he sometimes thought. He occasionally took creative inspiration from the famous director and applied it to his own work, no matter how small.

"I might just take off upstairs and work on my latest poem," he expressed with rising energy.

"No problem," his father replied.

"Sorry if the news is bothering you, I can turn it off if you wish. I'm just flogged from the heat and needed to sit down."

He toddled upstairs, greeted by his mother at the top. She had been checking Facebook in the upstairs office. Like the other members of her family, she was none too keen on social media, but used it to keep up to date with what was happening locally.

"Tom Comerford died," she said.

Peter searched his brain, attempting to remember somebody he should've known.

"Oh, God. Right. Comerford? Tom? He was a Protestant, wasn't he?"

"He was," his mother replied.

"Ya, I remember, they were fierce Prods," Peter added.

She continued downstairs, entering the TV room to tell Charlie. His response was almost identical to his son's.

"Tom, the Protestant fella from Duhallow?"

"That's right," Daphne replied.

"Ya, I think he was involved in the hunt. One of his sons

was active in Macra.”

“I’ll leave a message on the online book of condolences,” Daphne said.

“Good idea.”

Charlie picked up the remote and jumped down through the various channels, hoping that a somewhat good movie would be playing. Unfortunately, he formed the opinion that everything on TV was a load of rubbish. Daphne scolded him for what she saw as laziness.

“Stop wasting your time at that and get up!”

“Ok, ok, ok! I’ll get going now,” he retorted in defence.

By now, the temperature had gone down a bit, but that hadn’t stopped the sweat from dripping into Charlie’s eyes. As far as he was concerned, it may as well have been the Sahara Desert out there. Meanwhile, Peter had finished another poem upstairs. Looking to change the subject, he began reading the 1920 book *Credit Power and Democracy*, written by the renowned economic theorist, Major Clifford Hugh Douglas. Peter was fascinated by Douglas’ recognition that the financial system was not, in fact, self-liquidating, which altered further the global perceptions of our money and credit systems. If it wasn’t for the parasitic private financier, who distorted the economy by restricting the money supply in such a way that actual demand did not match productive capacity, things would be so much better, he thought.

Peter was unique in the sense that he could easily flick over between completely unrelated concepts, for it was only moments earlier that he had finished a piece on the beauty of flowers. However, both were highly abstract and required sufficient brain capacity in this area, which was something in which he excelled and won the admiration of many. It was this ‘outside the box’ thinking that made Peter a revered individual at such a young age. He was a leader of men.

It was a Tuesday afternoon, the day after the Bank Holiday weekend. The gravel crunched underfoot. The hum of a stationary engine could be heard from inside. Then, silence. The O'Donnell-Smiths had a visitor, but weren't expecting anyone. A red Mazda saloon, sporting a Dublin registration, had pulled up – a typical mid-range car.

An official-looking man got out of the car. Dressed in a sharp suit, he reached into the back seat, grabbing a transparent folder. The cover page had a picture of a harp on the header; the State seal. There was something formal and purposeful about him. As he got out of the car, he slammed the door shut. He was no ordinary visitor.

Approaching the front door with smooth, deliberate steps, the tails of his polyester suit jacket billowed slightly in the gentle breeze. The calmness of the surroundings contrasted sharply with the man's presence. He wore a pair of sports-style sunglasses, the kind with rainbow-reflecting lenses that had become somewhat of a cliché.

A silver tie clip kept everything in place, his appearance neat and precise, yet there was a certain air of impatience about him. He seemed ready to get straight to business, whatever it may be.

The bronze door knocker, tarnished with a slight green hue, was older than most of the people who used it. He gripped it firmly. Slamming it against the door five times in quick succession, he waited, expecting a prompt answer.

The man stood waiting for a minute, but there was no response. He tried again, this time pressing the doorbell, but still, there was no answer. He glanced around the corner of the house, noticing there was no car in sight. Not even the pony in the yard looked up to acknowledge him. She was busy grazing on a patch of grass.

Growing increasingly frustrated, he sat back in his car and started the engine. He glanced at the clock on the dashboard

– almost two o'clock. That was far too late for a visit like this. By the time he made it to the café, it would be half past two, and his workday would be winding down. He sighed, irritated.

The man made a final mental note that he would return.

Later that day, Kate and Sarah were riding two ponies along the quiet country road. The air was thick with the scent of lavender, its calming fragrance spreading throughout the townland. The ditches that flanked the road were wild, tangled with nettles and briars that seemed to reach out in an unruly manner, as though they too sought their own space in the world. The rhythmic sound of the ponies' hooves striking the tarmac brought a steady cadence to the otherwise tranquil atmosphere. It was a sound that brought a sense of order to their otherwise carefree ride. Thankfully, there were no strangers about, no disturbances of the kind that might unsettle the peace.

The encroaching sprawl of the city and the relentless march of modern culture had deprived many of the simple pleasures of rural life, but for the two girls, this moment on the quiet breen was an escape from the weight of the world. The ponies, too, seemed to enjoy their day out, their slow and steady progress a reflection of the calmness that enveloped the landscape. At times, especially as they neared bends in the road, there was an unspoken tension between them—what if a car came speeding around the corner, taking them by surprise? The thought lingered in their minds, but it was a fleeting worry. In truth, both girls were only too glad to be out here, away from the weight of the indoors.

"Have you never ridden a pony before?" Sarah asked, her curiosity piqued.

"I did when I was younger," Kate replied, a faint trace of nostalgia in her voice. "I was in a pony club, but then I got interested in other things."

"Ah, I figured," Sarah said, a knowing smile crossing her face.

There was a pause as they continued along, the only sound the soft rhythm of hooves on road. Sarah, ever so inquisitive, seemed to be turning over something in her mind. She was hesitant, unsure whether the moment was right, but eventually, she decided to ask.

"Kate, uh, when you... when you were brought up... for that... what did you feel?" The words hung awkwardly in the air between them.

Kate froze for a moment, as though the question had struck her like a cold gust of wind. It was a question she had long avoided, and yet, it was the one thing that remained unsaid between them—the elephant in the room. She was momentarily at a loss, but in an instant, she composed herself, offering a response that was more defensive than reflective.

"Well, um... I guess I felt, uh... nothing."

Sarah's eyes widened in disbelief. "Nothing? How could that be?"

Kate's answer puzzled Sarah. How could anyone feel 'nothing' about something so pivotal? It was a concept that was beyond her understanding, but perhaps that was because Sarah had grown up in a world far more comfortable and, in her view, far more straightforward. She had a different outlook, a different frame of reference.

"It's normal, like," Kate answered, her voice flat and without emotion. There was no hint of reflection in her tone, no sign that she had ever really grappled with her past.

Sarah felt her frustration rise. "Prudes like you have way too high expectations of the world."

The word 'prude' struck Sarah with a particular force. To her, it was a word used by those seeking to excuse their own behaviour, a euphemism that wrapped up their actions in a

cloak of normalcy and acceptability. She couldn't understand how someone could simply 'not care,' and it left her feeling more than a little angry. But her emotions were complex. Perhaps, in her own naive way, Sarah didn't fully grasp the depths of what the world was capable of.

As they continued their ride, Sarah's thoughts darkened, but she kept her emotions hidden, trailing behind Kate without letting on. Her anger, a mixture of confusion and resentment, simmered silently.

They approached a junction where the country road met a busier, main thoroughfare. Due to roadworks near the house, they had to cross this junction, and it was no small matter. The cars here sped by at reckless speeds, often hitting 100 km/h, with large haulage lorries and 4x4s dominating the scene. To cross this stretch was a game of chance, one where a split-second miscalculation could result in disaster. Kate had never crossed here before, but Sarah, though familiar with the risk, was always on edge. Her awareness was sharp, her senses heightened by the need for caution.

"Alright," Sarah said, her voice steady but firm. "When I say go, we go. No hesitating, no waiting. Picking the right moment is a matter of life and death."

She glanced back at Kate, her tone conveying the gravity of the situation. "You got that?"

Kate nodded, though she remained outwardly relaxed, almost too much so. Her easy-going nature, it seemed, had not quite grasped the seriousness of the moment. Sarah, always the more cautious of the two, watched her friend with a sharp eye.

"Listen to me," Sarah urged. "Be ready."

Sarah nudged her pony into a trot, positioning herself for the crossing. "Let's go!"

With a sharp kick, she urged her pony into action. Kate, however, lagged behind, sluggish and distracted. Her head

was tilted slightly, her AirPods tucked into her ears—again.

"Come on, Kate!" Sarah called, her impatience growing. "No time for messing about!"

Finally, Kate responded, pulling her pony forward, but with none of the urgency Sarah had hoped for. As they neared the second lane, a sudden blare of a horn pierced the air, sending both ponies into a panic. A large haulage lorry, its front lined with bright LED lights, was coming fast.

"Quick, quick, quick!" Sarah shouted, her voice urgent now, laced with fear.

Kate, still startled by the sound, snapped into action. She pulled the reins, giving the pony a crack of the whip. The animal surged forward, spooked but obedient. With a final desperate yank, Sarah hauled Kate's pony forward, just as the lorry sped past, its horn blasting in a deafening roar. The two girls were across, barely in time.

"Jesus Christ! You almost got us killed!" Sarah's voice was a mixture of anger and relief, her heart still racing.

Kate, her face pale with shock, quickly apologised. "I'm so sorry! I didn't know! Sarah, I'm really sorry!"

Sarah exhaled, her shoulders sagging as the tension left her body. "Look, at least we're okay. But just... be more aware next time."

They made their way back to the house, the quiet of the road now a stark contrast to the adrenaline that had surged through them moments before. Outside the front living room window, they found Charlie sitting in a chair, his head down, a troubled look on his face. The day, it seemed, was not quite finished yet.

8

In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet famously posed the question, "What are men to rocks and mountains?" A query that sought to contrast the transient concerns of human nature with the enduring, steadfast presence of nature itself. In Austen's hands, this rhetorical question helps to unravel the complexities of Elizabeth's own heart and mind as she navigates her world. But, as it is with all things in literature, the question lingers beyond its immediate context. What are men to rocks and mountains? Certainly, one might wonder, when Sarah saw her father, Charlie, in such an unsettled state.

"What's wrong, Dad?" she asked, her voice betraying her concern.

Charlie, his shoulders hunched and his gaze firmly fixed on the ground, was a picture of frustration and anxiety. The weight of his words hung heavy in the air.

"I've been accused of tax fraud," he replied in a low tone. "Someone clearly has it in for me. I know I'm in the right, but the cost of fighting it... it's going to be a lot, and the price of losing is far worse."

He still did not raise his head, the burden of it all weighing him down so much that he could not meet his daughter's

eyes. The springtime sun continued to shine brightly, but the world outside seemed to lose some of its warmth as Sarah absorbed the gravity of his words. The earth, so full of life in that moment, seemed to offer no relief for her father's inner turmoil.

"When did you find out about this?" Sarah asked, puzzled, as it was an odd time of year for such an issue to surface.

"I got a phone call," Charlie muttered, his voice thick with frustration.

"How can you be sure it's real? There's so many scams floating around these days."

"No," he replied with certainty. "This is genuine. And it's... wicked. Pure vindictiveness. Do you remember when we switched accountants because we thought they were charging too much?"

Sarah thought back for a moment, trying to recall the events he mentioned.

"Uh, yes?" she ventured cautiously.

"Well," Charlie continued, "it's common for disgruntled accountants to file complaints or make 'tip-offs' against former clients. It's often done out of spite, especially when someone thinks they've been wronged."

Sarah's lips parted, her mind grasping at the harshness of what was unfolding. "Oh, dear," she said softly, the weight of it all settling upon her shoulders.

"We'll get through it," Charlie reassured her, though his words lacked conviction. "It'll be tough, but we'll manage."

Sarah had always been a pillar of strength in moments of crisis, but this news shook her, if only for a moment. Not only did she now have to help a friend deal with a troubling personal issue, but she had to support her father through the unexpected trial of a legal battle. Charlie, his fists clenched in frustration, let out a growl.

"Those bastards from Revenue!" he spat, nearly tearing at

his hair in his agitation.

"We'll figure it out, Dad. We always do," Sarah said, trying to soothe him, though the words felt hollow. Charlie, though strong in many ways, was never one to respond well to bad news. He had weathered many storms in his life, but this storm was different, and his reaction to it was a raw and human one.

Inside, Daphne was at the stove, seemingly unaffected by the news but deeply concerned beneath her calm exterior. She was preparing two frozen pizzas—Goodfellas, the kind that came in a box, a quick and easy fix for a night that had taken an unexpected turn. She chopped ingredients as though trying to lose herself in the mundane task. The kitchen smelled of warm dough and tomato sauce, a small comfort amid the brewing storm. On the surface, Daphne appeared unconcerned, but even she couldn't ignore the rising tide of worry for what lay ahead.

Kate, on the other hand, was lost in the digital world, scrolling through Snapchat, her face illuminated by the glow of her phone screen. Her tendency to remain absorbed in her device hadn't yet been shaken, though Sarah was beginning to wonder if that would change in the coming weeks. With her father's troubles ahead, Sarah would need to divide her attention, and she couldn't help but feel a certain frustration with her friend's lack of awareness.

Meanwhile, Peter was deep in the throes of a personal victory of his own. Sat before his scratched MacBook, the worn silver casing reflecting the light from his desk, he tapped away with the same intensity he had brought to everything in life. Despite the lack of a reliable internet connection and the occasional hiccup in his browser, Peter persevered. He had spent countless hours developing a new brand of tequila, not out of any personal taste—he had never touched a drop of alcohol—but because business was

business. And this, he thought, was an opportunity.

He'd scoured the internet, found a manufacturer, and spent weeks hammering out the details—costs, variations, packaging, the minutiae of the business world. The task had been as monotonous as it was frustrating. The bureaucratic hurdles were endless, especially when trying to incorporate a company. Each time he submitted his application, a new issue arose. One word wrong here, a missed comma there, and his paperwork would be returned with a request for correction. He'd begun to wonder, perhaps not without reason, why the Companies Registration Office couldn't just get it right the first time. Wouldn't it be more efficient to give people the feedback all at once? It seemed so obvious, and yet, the inefficiency was maddening.

But Peter, ever determined, had found a way. He'd become a vendor for large food and drink distributors. The hard work was beginning to pay off. Finally, he could see the light at the end of the tunnel. All that was left now was one final step—the bank.

Oh, the bank. Peter's relationship with financial institutions had always been strained at best. To him, they were a necessary evil. He'd already secured some start-up grants from Enterprise Ireland, but he knew that wouldn't be enough to take the business forward. The bank was the final hurdle, and it was one that filled him with dread. Little did he know, the local branch manager had shares in a competing tequila brand. He would soon learn that his victory might not be as straightforward as he had hoped.

And so, as one family faced its storm, another was riding the winds of ambition, each caught in the complex web of human endeavour.

"Balancer, but not too much fibre," Daphne muttered to herself, as she mixed up the evening feed for one of the ponies. The bright orange plastic bucket—her ever-reliable

tool—was being filled with the carefully measured mix. It wouldn't be long before the next agricultural show, and everything had to be just right. Daphne strode out into the paddock, her wellies squelching in the mud, the familiar brown-tinted puddles near the gate greeting her with their steady, almost mocking presence. Evita, the energetic filly, dashed toward her, her tail swishing eagerly. She hoped for a taste of the specially made feed, though it was not intended for her.

"Not for you, Evita," Daphne called, pulling the bucket away as the young pony tried to nudge her nose into it.

Evita wasn't one to give up easily. She pranced around Daphne, trying to get closer, as if determined to wear down the resistance. If her persistence continued, Daphne's tone would shift from polite dismissal to a firm reprimand.

"No, stop it! No, no, Evita, get away!" she scolded, her voice now stern.

If necessary, she would give the pony a firm smack on the face—something she believed was necessary to teach good manners, both in the ring and in everyday handling. Evita, undeterred by the reprimand, would strut along beside Daphne, her sass unapologetically on display.

The sun was low, casting a soft amber glow over the paddock. A gentle breeze stirred through the trees lining the ditch, while the cool humidity made the atmosphere feel almost serene, despite the growing sense of tension. Daphne's eyes briefly drifted to the dock leaves growing at the edge of the field. Should she pull them up? She wondered. Some days, she thought, it was just better to leave things as they were.

Reaching the gate to the next paddock, Daphne paused for a moment. Why not just drop the feed bucket through the fence? It was the easiest way, certainly. But no, that wasn't her style. She believed in the importance of the details—the

care and attention given to the animals were crucial. She checked the water trough to ensure there were no bits of hay floating in it, as that could discourage the ponies from drinking. She inspected their coats for any marks or fly bites, which could cause irritation and lead to infection if left untreated. And then, there was the grass. How much was left? Overgrazing could lead to soil erosion, which would make the land less fertile for future growth.

It was like the Amazon, Daphne mused, where overexploitation had led to irreparable damage. But at least here, in her paddock, she had the power to make sure it didn't happen. As she took in the landscape, she briefly thought of Kate, who, with her tendency to tweet about environmental concerns, might have more to say on the matter. Of course, she wasn't out here to actually do anything about it.

"Bonnie! Feed time!" Daphne called out, her attention turning to the Shetland pony at the far side of the paddock.

Unlike Evita, Bonnie was stubborn and slow to respond. The little chestnut pony, with her mud-splattered coat and gold mane tangled in muck, could have been mistaken for a wild animal in the throes of defiance. If Bonnie had rolled in a cement mixer, Daphne thought, she couldn't look any worse.

"Come here, Bonnie!" she called again, her patience thinning.

Bonnie barely acknowledged her. She was happily grazing, as though Daphne didn't exist. Daphne entered the paddock, slamming the bottom of the bucket against the ground to signal that she had food. Bonnie lifted her head, glanced briefly at Daphne, and then trotted over, her movement slow but sure.

"Well, you couldn't resist the food, could you?" Daphne said with a small smirk, carefully placing the bucket on the ground.

But even as Bonnie tucked into the feed, Daphne was aware of a familiar, pesky presence beside her. Evita, having followed her across the paddock, was once again trying to get into the bucket.

"Evita, I've got nothing for you!" Daphne protested, but the filly wasn't done. She nudged Daphne's arm with her nose, determined to get something.

"Alright, alright," Daphne sighed. "I'll get you something small, but you'll get laminitis if you're not careful."

Turning to head back towards the house, Daphne glanced at the shed. She noticed something strange—a bright orange glow flickering from the side of it.

"Wait a second..." she muttered to herself.

Her heart skipped a beat. Smoke. She was sure of it now. Daphne's instincts kicked in, and without another thought, she sprinted toward the shed, vaulting over the gate with an agility that surprised even her. When she reached the front, she could see that it was worse than she'd feared—the tractor was ablaze.

"Oh, my God!" she screamed, her voice trembling with panic.

Frantically, she whipped out her phone and dialled 999, almost shattering the screen with the force of her fingers. As she yelled for the others, Peter and Charlie rushed from the house, their faces stricken with disbelief.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Peter cursed under his breath, his usual calm shattered by the sight before him.

"Jesus! Peter, get the hose!" Charlie barked, his voice tight with urgency.

Peter wasted no time. He rushed to the tap, unrolling the hose, while Charlie dragged it toward the fire. With a deep breath, Peter turned the tap, and his father aimed the hose at the tractor's engine. But it wasn't the engine that was the problem. It was the line of petrol and a cigarette under the

cab—an accident waiting to happen.

“The fire brigade’s on their way!” Daphne shouted over the noise, her voice raw with fear.

Sarah and Kate had arrived by this point, their expressions ranging from panic to disbelief. There was no time for hesitation now.

“We have to do something!” Sarah yelled, her voice sharp with determination.

“You get the power washer!” Kate ordered, already running back inside. Sarah stood frozen for a moment before Kate was gone. She ran back out, dragging the power washer behind her.

“Here! Give me the hose,” Kate barked, her hands already working quickly to attach it to the washer.

Sarah passed her the hose without question, and Kate turned the power washer on. She sprayed water at the tractor, trying to dampen the flames, but it wasn’t enough.

“That’s not working,” Sarah said, her voice filled with panic.

Kate, however, had already sprinted back into the house. She returned with a heavy bag in her hands.

“It’s baking soda,” she said breathlessly. “This will help put it out.”

Opening the bag, she grabbed handfuls of baking soda and threw them at the tractor, while Sarah sprayed the areas she targeted. Slowly, the flames began to subside.

“We’re doing it!” Sarah exclaimed, a sense of relief washing over her as the fire seemed to lose its strength.

Just then, the sound of sirens cut through the air. The fire brigade arrived, their massive Volvo fire engines roaring through the gates and onto the driveway. Firefighters, clad in yellow reflective suits, jumped out and quickly uncoiled their hoses.

“Stand back!” one of them called as they took over,

dousing the tractor with a powerful stream of water.

In what felt like a blur, the fire was extinguished. The tractor was left in ruins, a burnt-out husk of its former self.

It was a sorrowful sight, a reminder of how quickly things could go wrong, and how even the smallest of actions could change everything in an instant. A bright orange storm had passed through, leaving only a devastated David Brown tractor in its wake, and a family that would never forget the day the fire nearly consumed them all.

9

That night was one of distraught for Peter. His project, the one relic of the glory days, was ruined. The causes of the fire perplexed him. How could this possibly happen? He felt badly rattled, as if the world had suddenly shifted beneath him. Dejected, he sat on his bed, staring out the window at the hollowed-out remains of the tractor, its once proud shape now nothing but a blackened, charred shell.

Inside the house, Charlie had made the necessary call to the Gardai, as requested by the fire brigade. A short time later, their liveried Ford Mondeo estate pulled up the driveway. The three officers stepped out, their flashlights cutting through the darkness as they made their way toward the shed. Charlie greeted them, his tone a mix of gratitude and weariness, and led them to the tractor.

Shining their lights, the Gardai began to inspect the area, both inside and outside the shed. One of the officers crawled beneath the tractor to get a better look at the ground beneath. He froze, spotting something unsettling.

"Hold on, what's this?" he called out.

The other two Gardai immediately rushed over to him.

"There's a cigarette here, with a line of fuel trailing along the ground and under the tractor," one of them said, his voice

low with suspicion.

The two others crouched down, laying flat on the cement to examine the scene. It was an immediate red flag.

"I'd say forensics will want to take a look at this," one of them muttered.

"I'll have them come over first thing in the morning," replied another.

The officer stood up and turned to Charlie. "Does anyone in your house smoke?"

"Not that I know of," Charlie answered, his voice uncertain.

"Well, someone's left a cigarette near a line of fuel under the tractor. We suspect foul play," the Garda said grimly. "We'll have forensics come over to investigate."

Charlie nodded, though he wasn't sure what to make of it all.

"Thanks," he said, his mind spinning.

The Garda offered a sympathetic smile, his voice softening. "Obviously, this is devastating for you. My own dad keeps his old tractor at home. It's his pride and joy. Bought it new in 1975, and he has no intention of letting it go."

Charlie sighed, a weight pressing on his chest. The Garda's words hit too close to home.

"Yeah, well, unfortunately, it's no more. Like yourself, this was bought brand new by my father from the dealer. My son has a big interest in it. He's inside, distraught."

"We'll do our best to help," the Garda reassured him.

With that, the officers walked back to their car and drove off, the bright white LED headlights slowly fading into the distance as they left the driveway. Charlie stood there for a moment, his mind still reeling from the night's events.

"If only they could help me with something else," he muttered under his breath, as he turned back toward the house.

Inside, Daphne was sipping tea in the kitchen, dressed in her pyjamas. Sarah and Kate had decided it was best to keep their distance, staying in their room for the night. Kate was scrolling through TikToks, though she couldn't shake the lingering feeling of sympathy for the O'Donnell-Smiths. Sarah, on the other hand, wasn't so sure about Kate and her aloofness.

"That fire, was that anything to do with you? On purpose or not?" Sarah asked, a sharp edge to her voice as she broke the silence.

Kate slammed her phone down on the bed, an expression of disgust crossing her face. She was not one to be easily provoked, but Sarah's insinuation set her off.

"You're putting this on me? I had nothing to do with that!" Kate snapped, her frustration clear.

Sarah wasn't convinced. She gave Kate an angry stare, her gaze unyielding.

"I heard them talking. There was a cigarette on the ground. It caused the fire. Don't you tell me that you don't smoke with a straight face!" she accused.

Kate's eyes widened, disbelief flashing across her face.

"It wasn't me!" she shot back. "Did you not hear them say that someone drenched the underside of the tractor in petrol? Obviously, they dropped a cigarette on it to set it alight. How could that be me?"

Sarah stood there, her brow furrowed in thought. She didn't want to jump to conclusions, but something still felt off. She reluctantly nodded.

"Okay, then. Still, no smoking while you're here."

"I get it! Just get off my case," Kate retorted, rolling her eyes in frustration. She was too tired to deal with Sarah's interrogation, ready for the night to be over.

Sarah wasn't ready to drop it, though. "Tomorrow, when the forensic team comes, I'm going to make sure you're with

me to take a look. We should have nothing to do with cigarettes," she added, her voice firm.

Kate's silence was her answer, a passive-aggressive shutdown of the conversation. Sarah could feel the tension in the air, the unsaid words hanging heavily between them.

She turned off the light and settled into her bed, pulling the covers up over her. The smiley face emoji pattern on her sheets seemed to mock the grim atmosphere that had taken hold of the night. Sarah set her phone alarm for 6 a.m., determined to get some rest before facing whatever the next day would bring. It was better to sleep and start fresh—early.

The hours passed, and the full moon rose high in the sky, casting its pure, white light over the house. Unfortunately, for many, a full moon is linked to sleep difficulties, and Sarah was no exception. Tossing and turning in bed, she struggled to get the much-needed rest she so desperately sought. Meanwhile, Kate, completely unaffected, slept soundly through the night. Sarah found herself spiralling into what felt like a crisis. Despite the earlier events—the fire, the suspicion of foul play—her inability to fall asleep for even a short period of time became her new disaster. She grabbed her phone in frustration, seeking solace in a quick escape.

She opened YouTube, searching for a video of raindrops falling on a car windscreen. The sound of each drop slowly eased her tension, one tiny bit at a time. The moonlight poured through the bedroom window, its silver glow making everything seem surreal. Kate, who had never bothered to close the curtains, was lying closest to the window. Sarah's mind wandered.

What if there was a sinister plot against her family? The thought crossed her mind again. She could be a little unhinged, sure, but what if she was right? What if someone was targeting them maliciously? Her thoughts grew more intense. She imagined herself as the heroine in one of those

Liam Neeson action movies her father and brother loved so much. She could find the person responsible and kill them. But then, another raindrop fell, its sound snapping her back to reality. Each droplet made her feel calmer, more relaxed. The idea of violent revenge slipped away as sleep finally began to settle in. The struggle now was staying awake long enough to turn off her phone before the video played indefinitely—something she had often failed at before. And tonight, it happened again.

“Get up.”

Sarah's eyes flew open. It was morning. Kate stood over her, already wide awake, her face impassive. Did she forget to set the alarm? Sarah fumbled for her phone, but when she picked it up, it was dead. The video must have drained the battery. Her mind spun. She had slept through the night—lost to Kate, the one who didn't need to be reminded to wake up on time, the one who was always up before her.

By the time Sarah finally made it downstairs, her eyes still heavy with sleep, she noticed something unpleasant. The dogs had urinated on the legs of a few older, decorative chairs, leaving yellow puddles around the coffee table. She muttered a curse under her breath, more annoyed with herself than with the dogs.

“Flip sake,” she groaned, walking over to grab some kitchen paper and cleaning spray. But as she ambled back toward the puddles, her gaze froze. The gold-coloured cigarette lighter, shaped like a chicken and usually sitting on the coffee table, was gone.

A sudden wave of anxiety washed over her. Had the lighter been used to burn the tractor? Did that mean the perpetrator had taken it from inside the house, right under their noses? Sarah's mind raced, and her stomach churned with worry. The lighter's disappearance seemed to confirm her suspicions. There was something deeply unsettling about

it.

Meanwhile, the forensics team had already arrived and was investigating the tractor. They were aware of the fire and working quickly, methodically. Sarah spotted their custom 4x4, a gloss black unmarked vehicle with tinted windows, parked just outside the house. The team was serious, and their presence was intimidating.

Sarah decided to go outside and ask if they knew anything about the missing lighter. As she approached, one of the investigators greeted her first.

"Hello," he said politely. "I'm guessing you saw this unfold last night?"

"Yeah, it was very bad," Sarah replied, her voice strained.

The investigator asked, "Did you notice anything out of place around the time the fire happened?"

Sarah hesitated for a moment, then replied, "Actually, I noticed something just now, which is why I came out to speak to you. There's this old cigarette lighter in the house—it's shaped like a chicken, kept on display on the coffee table as an heirloom. But now, it's gone. Did you take it to examine it, or was it already missing?"

"We haven't been inside the house yet, but that's definitely something worth noting," the investigator said, pulling out a notebook and pen. He scribbled down what she'd told him, looking up at her when he finished.

"Is there anything else that's missing, or out of the ordinary?"

"No," Sarah replied, trying to keep her voice steady. "Not that I've seen."

"We might take a look inside the house to see if we can find anything else," he said, nodding to his colleagues.

"Okay, no bother," Sarah answered, though her thoughts were elsewhere. The missing lighter weighed heavily on her mind.

The forensics team was already deep into their work. Inside the shed, fingerprint scanning devices and other specialised equipment were scattered across the floor. The team handled everything with careful precision, wearing gloves and treating each item with the utmost delicacy. They meticulously combed over the tractor, collecting evidence, before moving inside the house. They took surface samples from around the area where the lighter had been, hoping to uncover any clues.

It took another hour or two before the team finally finished inside the house. Daphne had brought them a tray with tea and snacks, but they stood outside to drink it, careful not to contaminate any potential evidence. Their teeth could be heard crunching through the chocolate chip cookies, the sounds oddly loud in the otherwise quiet morning.

Sarah, meanwhile, had walked around the house, the yard, the stables, and the ditches, searching for the lighter. But it was nowhere to be found. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was very wrong.

The heat in the street was unbearable, thick and stifling, compounded by the constant bustle, the dust, the scaffolding, the bricks, and the oppressive plasterwork that seemed to envelope everything in sight. The air felt like it had been trapped in the narrow streets, unable to escape. The familiar stench of summer in the city, a pungent mixture of fermentation from the nearby bars and the omnipresent odour of sweat, made everything worse. The sight of what he dubbed as 'winos' drifting by, seemingly unaffected by the heat, despite it being a working day, completed this very grim tableau. The young man walked through it all, his nerves already frayed. He was in Cork City.

His cheap polyester suit hung awkwardly on his body, too tight in the chest and arms and too loose everywhere else. The fabric, non-breathable and uncomfortable, made him

sweat, adding to his discomfort. To make matters worse, his flimsy, rainbow-reflective sunglasses only drew more attention to his disheveled appearance. He walked with a sharp awareness of everything around him, his eyes constantly darting from one detail to the next, always analysing and scrutinising. From time to time, he muttered to himself, speaking thoughts aloud, a habit he had recently acknowledged and was trying, without success, to break. In these moments, his thoughts tangled, and he realised just how fragile his mental state had become under the intense heat.

His clothes, barely fit for public viewing, were the least of his concerns now. Even a man accustomed to shabbiness would have turned away in embarrassment from such attire. However, in this part of the town, where the proximity to the market and the prevalence of low-end establishments and trendy students created a mishmash of people, no one would bat an eye at his appearance. Yet, despite this, a deep bitterness churned in his heart. In the crowded streets, he could endure his ragged outfit, but when he encountered acquaintances, former classmates, or anyone he once knew, the shame resurfaced. That was when his discomfort would reach its peak.

However, when a prisoner, his face contorted in drunken rage, yelled at him from the back of a prison van, his words piercing through the noise of the street, everything shifted. "Hey there, sham!" The words were sharp and pointed, accompanied by a crude gesture that sent a jolt through the young man. He froze. His heart raced. It wasn't the shame that hit him but something deeper, something resembling terror. His hand shot up to his hat—a faded baseball cap from TK Maxx, frayed and bent beyond recognition. It was barely hanging on, worn and battered, an oddity in a city where fashion was as much a statement as it was a shield.

"I knew it," he muttered, almost to himself. "I thought so! That's the worst of all! A stupid thing like this... it could ruin everything. My hat's too noticeable. It looks absurd! I should've worn something inconspicuous, not this ridiculous thing! Nobody wears a hat like that. People will remember it. And that's what matters, they'll notice. They'll connect it to me. Trifles, trifles... that's what always ruins everything."

He continued down the street, his mind racing with the idea that something as trivial as his hat could be the deciding factor in the failure of his plans. He didn't have far to go—only seven hundred and thirty steps to the office block he was headed to. He'd counted them once, a long time ago, lost in his thoughts and dreams. At the time, he hadn't thought much of it. But now, those steps were imprinted in his mind, and the office, just ahead, had become the focal point of his increasingly unstable ambitions.

With a sense of dread, he approached a large building that stood tall next to the River Lee, its windows staring out over the water while others faced the street. The building was a mishmash of small rented units, inhabited by a variety of people—immigrants, students, and the like. The adjacent building was filled with small gadget shops, adding to the area's chaotic energy. People were coming and going through the gates, each one carrying with them a sense of purpose—or maybe just a desire to escape the heat. Security buzzers and digital keypads adorned the walls, but the young man wasn't concerned about them. He moved swiftly, unnoticed, slipping through the door on the right and into the dimly lit, narrow staircase. It was a back entrance he knew well, and the familiarity of it soothed him. In the shadows, no one would notice him, no one would question him.

He climbed the stairs, stepping lightly as he reached a small pawn shop run by a "friend" of sorts—a fixer with a reputation for getting things done in exchange for favours. A

heavily bearded man with a cold, intimidating gaze stood behind the glass counter, watching him carefully. Beside him, an old woman, frail and with a haggard appearance, lingered. Her oil-slicked, colorless hair hung in thin strands, and the flannel rag tied around her neck only highlighted the weariness in her features. Despite the heat, she wore a tattered fur cape, a strange contradiction in the stifling environment.

"I came here a month ago," the young man mumbled, bowing slightly, his attempt at politeness only adding to his discomfort.

"I remember, mister," the old woman said in a low, raspy voice, her eyes narrowing as she studied his face.

"And here I am again, on the same errand," he continued, feeling a mix of unease and annoyance.

The old woman paused, her eyes lingering on him as if assessing his every move. Then, with a gesture to the door, she spoke: "Yes, yes. Why step forward, mister."

The young man entered a small room where sunlight filtered through the muslin curtains, casting long shadows on the yellowed walls. A man was inside, completing a transaction. The old woman stepped aside, but her sharp gaze never left him.

"What do you want?" she asked, her tone demanding, as she followed him into the room.

He fumbled briefly, then pulled out a small golden cigarette lighter—a rare piece he hoped to pawn. It was a key item, critical to an unsolved case he was tangled in. He handed it over to her, but she seemed unimpressed.

"That's not worth much," she muttered, inspecting it briefly. "Last time, I gave you one hundred euros for the ring. It's worth about eighty now, second-hand."

"I'll give you fifty," the young man said, hoping for a fair deal. "It was my father's, and I'll redeem it soon. I'll be

getting money.”

“Forty-five, and I’ll give you preference next time,” she offered, her voice flat.

“Fifty!” he demanded, growing impatient.

“Please yourself,” the old woman replied, handing him back the lighter. He snatched it up, fury boiling inside him. For a moment, he considered leaving, but his mind quickly corrected him—there was still more to do.

“Hand it over,” he said, more sharply now, as the old woman shuffled off to get the keys to the drawer.

He stood there, his mind racing as he listened to the faint sound of her unlocking the chest. “It must be the top drawer,” he thought. “She carries the keys in a pocket on the right—too many keys on one steel ring. There’s a large key, three times as big as the others, with deep notches... that can’t be for the drawer. There must be something more valuable hidden away.”

The old woman returned, holding a small bundle of notes. “Here,” she said curtly, “three hundred euros for the lighter.”

“What! Only twenty euros for this lighter?” he exclaimed.

“That’s all it’s worth,” she replied with indifference.

“Do you have any idea what you’re dealing with?” he hissed. “I could lock you up for life with a single phone call.”

The old woman didn’t flinch, and with a quiet gesture, handed over the money. The young man, despite his anger, hesitated. There was something left unsaid, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. With one last bitter glance, he left the room.

“I may bring you something else soon, Yelena Bolova,” he muttered, already on his way out. “Something valuable.”

“Goodbye. Are you always home, or are your friends around?” he asked as he turned back, his voice laced with bitterness.

“None of your business, native controller,” she snapped.

With that, he walked out, his words lingering in the air, adding one more layer of disdain to his already wretched existence.

10

The days went by in a steady flow. Kate, gradually finding her rhythm, could see the subtle improvements that had eluded her for so long. The first weekend in July was nearing, and the daily routine, though unchanged, now had a new sense of fulfillment. A sense of peace and healing was creeping into her life, a feeling that she would never admit to anyone, but one she found immensely therapeutic. Every morning, she was met with the fragrant scent of lavender, a refreshing and calming fragrance that seemed a world away from the chaos she had once embraced. A fresh start had fallen into her lap, and for the first time in a long while, she was ready to embrace it.

Sarah, on the other hand, was caught in a different kind of struggle. Her father was facing a crushing legal battle, and the pressure was taking its toll. She would sit quietly in the kitchen, the lights off, her mind consumed with worry about what the future would hold for them. While Kate was blossoming into a new version of herself, Sarah grew more distant, retreating into herself and withdrawing from her friend, whose life was on an upswing. The weight of the situation affected the entire household, and what had once been a family proud of its accomplishments had now been

replaced by an undercurrent of melancholy.

Peter, however, was carving his own path. His stoic persona had become solidified, and he was determined to steer the family back on course. The once solitary figure was now filled with an unstoppable energy, but not in a brash or ostentatious way. His new outlook on life was one of intense focus, a “pedal to the metal” attitude. He wasn’t overly downcast, but there was certainly a pensive streak running through him as he set about his daily tasks.

“I’ll get us back on track,” he would mutter to himself, often several times a day.

Each morning, Peter would pull back the curtains with a burst of vigour, setting the tone for the day. His new business, a low-capital startup, was beginning to generate significant income. Sometimes, he couldn’t help but think of himself as a combination of Tommy Shelby and Oswald Mosley, a strange hybrid of power and cunning. Despite the sweltering heat, Peter refused to wear shorts, believing them to be a bit too casual for his taste. Fancy sunglasses, like the ones worn by Joe Biden, were also off the table. He thought they’d look out of place in Ireland, no matter how good they might look in Los Angeles or Miami. Instead, Peter made a conscious effort to dress smartly, opting for attire that was suited to the unforgiving heat of the summer.

With a sense of purpose, Peter would rock downstairs each morning, exuding energy and determination. He saw himself as the pillar on which the family’s future would stand. His motto, “No time for wasters,” was a mantra he lived by, one that he upheld with a dogma rivalled only by the late Ian Paisley.

Another Saturday came around. The low hum of a small diesel engine could be heard in the distance, gradually growing louder as it neared the gate. The top of a green van appeared over the tall hedge that ran along the top of the

otherwise low boundary wall. It was the post van. Dread. Dread. Dread. The last thing Charlie wanted to see was the blasted post van, especially since they had started delivering on weekends. Any day, any moment, more bad news could slip into the letterbox. He winced as he approached the box, desperately trying to maintain a composed expression. Opening the lid, he grabbed the letters, immediately inspecting the envelopes for any markings that might indicate their origin. If there was a harp, panic would set in. Usually a tough and resilient man, this had shaken him to his core. Thankfully, today was not that day, but he knew in his gut that more was coming. Charlie didn't openly display his sadness to his family, but his tense, disjointed energy had a way of spreading to the rest of them. This subtly encouraged some to turn to escapism, a dangerous path that was all too easy to slip down.

In an unexpected turn, Sarah and Kate decided, at the former's suggestion, to go outside—and not just outside, but to town. Town. A dangerous place where the naive often fell victim to its maliciousness, deceit, and misery. One could argue that Charlie's growing angst was what ultimately drove this out-of-character decision. They had planned the trip carefully, picking specific shops and cafés they wanted to visit. Daphne would give them a lift to the train station in Mallow, just as Kate had arrived a few weeks earlier. From there, they would take a train to Kent Station, Cork City, a place simultaneously composed of dereliction, industrial decay and rich artistic cultural diversity, though one Sarah was entirely unfamiliar with.

As the train neared Cork city, it was swallowed by a long tunnel, and the countryside vanished into darkness. That unbroken blackness seemed to foreshadow the risk and uncertainty of the urban landscape ahead. Sarah put on a relaxed front, but inside, worry consumed every nerve in her

body. The platform finally appeared as the train emerged from the tunnel, and as it slowed to a halt, Kate and Sarah stood and made their way toward the door. It whooshed open with the dramatic sound of a spaceship hatch from a sci-fi movie. Stepping out onto the cold concrete platform, Sarah couldn't help but feel the chill in the air.

"I should've put on another layer," she mumbled under her breath.

Kate, ever the guide, gave her a reassuring smile. "If we turn left at the gates by the road, we can head into the main part of town. That'll take us along the Lee, and then we can cross a bridge to visit all the shops and cafés."

"Great! This is very exciting," Sarah replied, trying her best to embrace the adventure.

"Looking at it this way, we can actually get around to everything and be done in a couple of hours," Kate added, her excitement palpable.

"Ok, let's go!"

Together, they left the train station and walked along the wide footpath, which bordered the main road. Across the river in the distance, they could make out Páirc Uí Chaoimh, its roof just visible above the treetops lining the water.

Crossing the bridge, a whole new world unfolded before them. An endless array of shops lined the streets, their windows displaying all manner of goods. The smell of the city itself perfectly matched the gritty, worn veneer of its surfaces. Grime and discarded cigarette butts were lodged stubbornly between the tiles of Patrick's Street, a visible mark of the city's rougher edges. The large number of people walking by without so much as a glance or a "hello" gave the impression of the city that Gerry Rafferty had described in his song '*Baker Street*' back in the 1980s:

"This city desert makes you feel so cold
It's got so many people, but it's got no soul..."

It had taken Kate so long to realise how wrong she had been, how much she needed to “forget about everything” and start anew. But now, they were here to explore Cork City. And, as the iconic song went, they were “never gonna stop movin’.”

Sarah was firm in her decision that they would stay well clear of the bars, which Kate, though reluctantly, agreed to. As a result, certain streets were off-limits and had to be avoided at almost all costs, with the only exception being when they needed to get to a nearby street. Standing in the middle of Oliver Plunkett Street, they looked both ways before spotting a clothes shop that immediately piqued their interest. With a renewed sense of enthusiasm, they made their way towards the door, a spring in their step, eager to escape the hustle and bustle of the busy street outside. Sarah, in particular, was a little anxious about returning to the big city. Visiting the various shops felt like a small retreat from the overwhelming energy of the crowds. Since the pandemic had ended, people no longer took the simple act of heading out for granted, but there remained a sense of caution in the air, a lingering feeling that one could easily become callous if they didn't maintain a certain level of reservedness. This wariness only added to the tension of being in built-up areas.

They browsed the clothing racks, inspecting various blouses, jumpers, and pairs of jeans. Several colours were available, except for the jeans, of course, which always seemed to come in the same classic denim blue. The modern, tall, double-glazed windows of the shop front did a good job of shielding them from the noise of the outside world, creating a brief haven in the midst of the chaos.

“What do you think of this?” Sarah asked, holding up a pink jumper from the 'SALE' rack.

“I think it's nice. You should ask the person at the till if you can try it on,” Kate suggested.

Sarah went over to the cashier and got permission to try the jumper on in the changing rooms at the back of the store. She was hoping to treat herself, but as she looked in the mirror after putting it on, self-doubt crept in. She could be insecure, and in these situations, she was often just as vulnerable as Kate had once been. Trying on the jumper filled her with hesitation, the same crippling self-doubt that had led Kate down a path of mistakes in the past.

"Let us take a look," Kate called from the other side of the changing room door.

"Okay," Sarah replied, her voice tinged with anxiety.

She opened the door, revealing her new look to Kate, who seemed genuinely impressed.

"It looks good on you," Kate said with a smile.

"Well, um, thanks," Sarah replied, a little timidly.

"You should buy it. How much is it?"

"It's reduced to fifteen euro, since it's on sale."

"That's a bargain! Buy it straight away!" Kate urged, her tone enthusiastic.

Sarah was slightly taken aback by Kate's words of support. Was she just saying that to seem relatable, or was she being sincere? Regardless, something about Kate's encouragement made Sarah feel motivated to make the purchase. At the till, Sarah tapped her debit card against the machine. The cashier folded the jumper and placed it into a paper bag.

"Thanks for your purchase," the cashier said.

"Thank you very much!" Sarah replied with a smile.

The two girls made their way back out onto the street, the weight of the bag in Sarah's hand somehow symbolising a small step forward.

They frolicked through the streets, exploring as much of the city as they could, though only in areas Sarah had pre-approved. Their 'couple of hours' in town were almost up, but then, an idea popped into Kate's head.

"What if we go to the cinema?" Kate suggested, eyes lighting up with excitement.

"I don't know," Sarah replied, hesitant. "Wouldn't it be late when we get back to the train station?"

"Ah, don't worry. This part of town is actually very safe at night," Kate reassured her.

"Um, okay," Sarah responded, though a hint of uncertainty lingered in her voice.

As the girls walked towards the cinema, they passed two shady-looking men hanging around near the corner of the building. One of them nodded at the other and muttered something unintelligible, not in English or Irish. A thick cloud of grey smoke billowed around them from their cigarettes, and their unshaven faces, adorned with light beards, added to their menacing appearance. They wore tracksuits with three stripes running down the arms and legs, and their body language suggested that they weren't the kind of people to be trusted.

Once Sarah and Kate entered the cinema, the men disappeared into the shadows, no doubt plotting something sinister.

Inside the cinema, the girls perused the selection of films. Every single movie on offer was a sequel, the tragic reflection of a Hollywood that had long since run out of original ideas. Gone were the days of Gregory Pecks, John Waynes, Grace Kellys, and James Coburns, icons from a golden era of filmmaking. But Kate and Sarah had never heard of those stars, so reminiscing about a different time felt irrelevant.

The next movie showing was a new *Fast and Furious* film, which Sarah grudgingly agreed to watch. They bought their tickets at the counter, along with fizzy drinks, popcorn, and ice cream. The red carpet on the floor looked slightly tacky, a reminder that this was a run-down part of Cork City. They opened the door into the screening room and entered the

darkness, unaware that more darkness awaited them when the movie ended.

Two and a half hours later, the door opened, spilling the sounds of the ending credits into the lobby. The blackness of the night outside was only held back by the bright LED lights overhead. Their 'couple of hours' had stretched into a much longer outing, and now, they were rushing to catch the last train home.

"That movie was good, maybe even better than the original," Sarah said, a little more animated.

"You see? I told you it would be good," Kate replied, pleased with her choice.

Leaving the cinema, they walked across town, carefree, heading towards the train station. The lights from the shops, cars, and streetlights guided their way. Their shoes clicked rhythmically on the pavement, a sound reminiscent of horse hooves on a concrete floor. The night in the city seemed normal—drunken nightclubbers stumbling about, behaving in ways that were all too familiar—but they weren't prepared for what lay ahead.

"I can't wait to get home," Sarah sighed. "I'm very tired."

"What? You wouldn't be any fun if you're too tired," Kate teased.

Sarah, always attentive to the sounds around her, had noticed something unsettling. The same pattern of footsteps had been trailing them for some time now. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She spoke quietly to Kate.

"You're going to call me paranoid, but the same few feet on the street have been behind us since we left the cinema."

"I think you're right," Kate said, her voice steady but tense.

They quickened their pace, and the men behind them responded, closing the distance. In an instant, the girls turned sharply down a side street and began to run. The men yelled after them in a foreign language, their voices laced with

menace.

"Run, run, run!" Kate urged, her heart pounding in her chest.

Sarah shrieked, panic rising in her throat. The men drew knives from their pockets, the cold steel gleaming under the streetlights. They were not going to let the girls slip away easily.

"This way! This way!" Kate shouted, guiding Sarah through the maze of streets.

They burst out into an open area, past the bus station, and into a crowd of young people. The men had no choice but to conceal their knives, blending in with the crowd. Still, they were determined to catch the girls and rob them. But as they emerged on the other side of the crowd, Sarah and Kate had disappeared. The men looked frantically in every direction, but to no avail. The girls had managed to slip away, vanishing into the night.

Sarah stopped to catch her breath, her heart racing. She was terrified, her whole body trembling. Kate put an arm around her in an attempt to console her, but Sarah's tears flowed freely.

"Did you see that? Do you know what they could've done to us?" Sarah cried, her voice shaking.

"I know, but we're okay. Look! We're okay!" Kate said, her voice soothing but urgent.

She hugged Sarah tighter, holding her steady as they continued walking. The train station was just ahead. The lights from the land cast an orange reflection in the dark river water, a serene contrast to the chaos they had just escaped. They had made it out of the night alive, but the memory of it would stay with them for a long time.

11

Back at the car park of Kent Station, the soft glow from the interior lights of the night train's carriages painted yellow-blue rectangles on the roadside, creating a kind of artsy display. Sarah and Kate hurried over to the station, but as they approached the front entrance, they slowed down, falling into a more relaxed pace—like a horse shifting from a canter to a walk in the middle of a high-level dressage routine.

They inserted their return tickets into the ticket machine, which promptly spat them back out with a tag confirming they had been used. The girls were on their way home, and after the terrifying experience they'd just gone through, it was clear they were in no rush to leave their safe haven for a long time to come.

Boarding the train, the low hum of the locomotive's stationary engine offered a strange, comforting backdrop, providing a soothing rhythm that helped to ease their palpable distress. They sank into their moquette-textured seats, typical of trains across Europe, and for a moment, Sarah let out a deep sigh of relief. Kate, however, stared out the adjacent window with an empty look, her thoughts

distant. She knew that if she showed any sign of fear to Sarah, she would lose the tough, city-girl persona she had been clinging to all evening.

"Are you okay?" Kate asked, trying to keep her voice steady, trying to maintain her stoic act.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Sarah gasped, her breath still shaky. She just wanted to see the front hall of her house again, to feel the safety and warmth of home.

"Look, what happened tonight... it rarely happens," Kate tried to reassure her, though her words felt hollow even to herself. "We just had bad luck. They must've noticed us when we went into the cinema."

Sarah wasn't entirely convinced. "Really though? I hear this stuff happens a lot. I mean, *a lot*."

Kate was momentarily stunned by her friend's bluntness. She hadn't expected that response.

"I know it was a bad night, but weren't we okay during the day?" Kate pushed, trying to lift the mood. "The next time we go back—"

"The next time?" Sarah interrupted, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

"Yeah, well, if you're comfortable with it," Kate replied, her voice more tentative now. "The next time, we can just visit town during the day and head home before it gets dark."

Sarah hesitated. "Uhhh, I don't know." She wasn't sure how soon she'd want to step back into that urban chaos.

Kate slumped back into her seat, feeling unexpectedly dejected. Her longed-for return to city life, the excitement she'd once felt about the urban adventures, now seemed far less appealing. The sense of defeat crept over her, swallowing her up, and she was left to stew in her disappointment.

Just then, the distinctive voice of the Irish Rail automated announcer rang out through the speakers, cutting through the silence of the carriage. It didn't matter much to them, as

they would be getting off at the next stop anyway.

Once again, Kate watched as the platform began to recede into the distance, the train's wheels clattering rhythmically, the sound echoing through the quiet of the night. Moments later, the train plunged into the darkness of the long tunnel beneath Cork City, heading north of the River Lee. This time, however, it made little difference once they emerged at the other end. The inky black sky above, stripped of stars, deprived the passengers of any glimpse of the surrounding scenery. And as for the hope of a cart carrying teas, hot chocolates, sandwiches, or even mini cans of Pringles? It was simply too late for that.

Following half an hour of heading north, the train began to slow down. The lights of Mallow flickered into view through the window. It was the moment to depart. The girls, having made the same move earlier but now more hesitantly, picked up their bags and moved towards the carriage door. The train ground to a halt. As usual, the door whooshed open, sliding to the side, and the girls stepped out with weary, sluggish steps.

Walking down the stairs of Mallow train station, heading towards the car park, Kate stumbled on the metal steps and tumbled down the entire flight. They were so close to home, but as always, Murphy's Law had a way of making things worse.

"OUCH!" she yelped, but there was no radio playing, no AirPods in her ears, and no white noise to drown out the pain. The short journey home was eerily silent, with only the comforting hum of the car's heater filling the space. The green dashboard lights gave a welcome feeling of reassurance as the halogen headlights cast a yellowish hue over the worn-down boreen and its surrounding brambles. Despite the rumbling engine's coarse noise, the familiar, homeward-bound drive provided a sense of comfort, and the girls were

on the verge of falling into a deep sleep.

Charlie turned into the driveway, bringing the vehicle to a gentle stop before getting out to lock the gate behind him. The headlights illuminated the front of the house. To Kate, it felt as if she were witnessing the revelation of a "new heaven and a new earth," a sense of peace settling over her. Charlie sat back in his seat, rocking the car slightly before pulling up to the front door. When the engine cut off with a jarring stop, it startled Kate, waking her from her light doze. Sarah, however, was fast asleep. Kate poked her shoulder, attempting to rouse her.

"Sarah, Sarah, we're back. We're home. It's okay. Let's go inside and go to bed."

Sarah groggily stretched her legs and twisted her neck, reluctant to wake but ultimately glad she had. Leaving the back seat in a half-hearted manner, she dragged her heels as they walked through the front door, so tired that she left her shopping in the boot. Sarah wasn't the type to forget her things, but exhaustion had taken over.

With the exception of the dim front hall lights and the occasional lamp, the house was dark. They dragged themselves upstairs, collapsing onto their beds in a state of total fatigue. Hopefully, morning would bring something better.

Sarah ran down the stairs in a rush to help Kate, who was still struggling with the cold, steel steps. Kate awoke with a sudden cold shiver running along her cheek, right into her temple. She was surprised to find her face pressed against the ground, the bedcovers tangled around her and hanging off the edge of the bed. Had she fallen out of bed? Her aching body confirmed it must have been the result of an uncomfortable sleep. She heard the faint sound of someone eating crisps in the nearby office. Curious, Kate poked her head around the door, but the upstairs landing was empty.

Then, there it was again—the “crunch” of someone munching.

It seemed to be coming from the adjacent office. Kate peered inside to see Charlie, sitting at the desk, typing on the iMac. It struck her as odd; he wasn’t typically one to use that computer in the morning. What could he possibly be doing there?

She caught a glimpse of micro-finance websites, displaying alarmingly high interest rates on loans. Kate was taken aback. This wasn’t like Charlie. Did Sarah, Daphne, or Patrick know about this? Her concern for the family grew, and she realized her perception of them was shifting. It was a far cry from the way she’d viewed them when she first arrived.

Sarah was still asleep, but Kate felt compelled to inform her about this troubling discovery. Moving quietly, she crouched low and placed her left foot on the floorboards, trying to avoid making any noise that would alert Charlie to her presence. She figured she could quietly leap across the hall to the other room. It might make a noise, but she didn’t think Charlie would pinpoint where it came from.

However, with her mind frazzled by the previous night’s events, she miscalculated and slipped on her right foot, falling with a thud. The noise startled Charlie.

“Jesus,” he exclaimed, swivelling around in his chair. “What on earth was that?”

He stood up and walked out onto the landing, only to find Kate sprawled on the floor.

“Are you alright?” he asked, concern in his voice.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Kate replied, her heart racing. She thought it might explode out of her chest.

“I just slipped on my way to the bathroom,” she added quickly.

“Oh, dear,” Charlie responded. “Do you want a hand up?”

“Yes, please. Thanks!” Kate said, grabbing his hand as he

pulled her up, letting her steady herself against the wall.

"There you go," he smiled.

"Thanks a million," Kate said, trying to play it off casually.
"I'll wake Sarah now."

"No bother, good idea," he said.

Kate went into Sarah's room. Charlie felt a sense of relief. He had been so focused on the websites that he hadn't considered the possibility of being caught. At least, that was what he thought.

Meanwhile, Sarah grabbed Kate's arm and helped her off the cold, metal stairs. Kate winced in pain as she noticed a bruise and a cut on her leg below her knee, evidence of her fall.

"Ow, ow, ow. I've bruised myself and cut my leg," Kate groaned. "That's the last thing I needed after all that."

"Let me take your bags," Sarah offered. Lucky for Kate, Sarah had a kind, obliging nature.

As they walked through the car park, Sarah spotted her father's car in the distance and waved at him, signaling their return. Charlie opened the Land Rover's clunky door and stepped out to greet them.

"Hello, girls! How was your day?" he asked.

Sarah, momentarily forgetting about the earlier incident, quickly shifted attention to Kate's injuries.

"It was okay, but Kate slipped on the steps and bruised herself and cut her leg," she said.

The roles had now reversed. It was Charlie showing sympathy for Kate, not the other way around.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Are you alright? Do you think anything's broken? Would you like me to take you to the Emergency Department?" Charlie asked, concerned.

"No, I'm okay, don't worry about me," Kate reassured him, trying to downplay the situation.

"We've got Sudocrem and some paracetamol at home if

you need it. And if you think there's anything else wrong, don't hesitate to let us know," he added.

"Thank you so much," Kate said, truly grateful for the family's care. She would never have received this kind of attention in the city.

The three of them climbed into the back of the Land Rover, and Charlie started the engine, putting the car in first gear and releasing the handbrake. He seemed eager to get home quickly, perhaps as a way to escape from his own worries.

"Teas are ready!" Daphne called from inside. No one ever came down immediately after that first call; it was just a warning shot. Sarah and Kate strolled downstairs in their usual, casual way, fully aware of the unusual atmosphere in the house.

"Tea—" Daphne called again.

Sarah and Kate entered the kitchen just in time to be handed their hot cups of tea.

"Sarah, would you call your brother and father, please?" Daphne asked.

"No bother," Sarah replied, turning to leave the room.

As Sarah walked back out into the hallway, Daphne carried the cups of tea to the kitchen table. Sarah's call echoed down the stairs, but there was an unusual delay before Charlie answered.

"On the way down," he called back.

Peter's response came slowly. "Peter! Tea!" Sarah called out again.

"Oh, ok," he answered gently.

Sarah's suspicions were immediately piqued. Peter was unusually slow to respond. When he emerged, his demeanor was notably relaxed, but there was an undercurrent of tension she could sense. His shoulders were stiff, his usual energy dampened. Something was off.

"Are you okay?" she asked, concerned.

"Yeah, I'm grand," he sighed. The sigh wasn't convincing, though. It was clear that he wasn't quite fine.

"Your tea is going cold," Sarah said, trying to get him to engage.

Peter slowly made his way downstairs, his head hanging low in disappointment. His body language spoke volumes—something was bothering him.

"Did you have a good night's sleep?" Sarah asked, attempting to make small talk.

"Ah, well, it was okay. It wasn't great, really, if I'm being honest. I was awake half the night," he confessed.

"What for?" Sarah probed gently.

"Uh, just one of those nights," he mumbled, brushing it off.

The rest of the family waited in the kitchen, and as Sarah and Kate entered, Daphne's eyes briefly lost their usual sharpness, which seemed strange to Kate. They all sat down in the kitchen, each of them wrapped in their own thoughts. The tension in the room was palpable, and Kate couldn't shake the feeling that something was seriously wrong, but she didn't know what it was. She tried to break the silence with small talk, but it only made things more awkward.

"Well, did anyone see the paper this morning?" she asked, her voice faltering as soon as the words left her mouth.

Everyone knew that Kate wasn't the type to read the paper, but everyone hesitated to speak, unsure of what to say next. The awkward silence dragged on until Charlie, clearly frustrated, muttered, "There's nothing to talk about."

Daphne gave him a sharp look. "Don't say that. We need to be aware of what's going on, in case things get worse."

Kate didn't know whether to be more worrisome about the family's seemingly strange behaviour, or the underlying tension. It seemed to her that they weren't ready to confront whatever had been troubling them.

12

The patent shoes clapped against the old cobbled footpath. The high gloss finish of the brogues distracted the eye from the patches of moss and weeds that had worked their way up through the cracks and gaps in the path. An endless haze of mist drifted over the quay, cloaking the docked fishing trawlers and cargo ships from view. Cork Harbour had never seemed so dull, but on a rainy Irish summer's day, it was about as good as it could possibly get.

Walking down the Marina, he struggled to distinguish the trees in the heavy fog. The area appeared largely quiet and lifeless, having been pedestrianised several years ago. He glanced at his smartwatch. The gloss black rim contrasted sharply against his plain white shirt. It was 10:23 a.m. He needed to be at the warehouse near Centre Park Road, Ballintemple, by 10:30. A short walk, but one with serious business to discuss. He picked up his pace, the anticipation acting as a catalyst. At 10:25, a reminder flashed up on his phone. He pulled it out to check. It was from the G-Man.

He turned down a narrow street, its double yellow lines glowing faintly through the fog. At the end of the street stood a large warehouse, its ridged galvanised sheeting painted in a dull mid-tone blue. Two black Audis with yellow UK number

plates were parked outside the large doors. A smaller door, corroded with age, sat at the corner of the warehouse. The structure had clearly been there for years.

He raised his left arm towards the door and knocked five times, pausing before knocking again three more times. Footsteps echoed from inside, and soon the locks on the door rattled. The door creaked open, revealing a menacing figure in a black turtleneck jumper. This man had piercing blue eyes, light blonde hair, styled in a rough buzz cut, and a long scar running from his forehead, down past his eye, and ending at the tip of his upper lip.

Upon recognising the G-Man, the figure gave a lukewarm greeting.

"Just on time," he said.

"Well, it's serious business," the official replied.

"Come on in, I'll show you what we received a couple of days ago."

He followed the coarse figure into the warehouse. The place had a grimy, industrial feel, but then again, he wasn't much different from the criminals who frequented such spaces.

"Here it is," the man announced, his voice tinged with caution.

He revealed a crate, covered in canvas. The official didn't quite know what to make of it.

"Ah, yes, what is it?" he asked, though his tone held no surprise.

"It's the new consignment of cocaine. Street value's €9 million. It'll help fund that new hospital your government's been planning for years," the man explained.

"Ha, of course," the government official replied dryly.

When someone desires something so badly, it's clear that the medium of exchange can often shift from money to something far more valuable — or dangerous.

"Did you bring the documents?" the criminal asked.

"I have them right here," the official responded, pulling a file from his bag. The cover was a light brown, and as he handed it over, he remarked, "Print's still better in this day and age."

The criminal opened the file. It contained details on Charlie, listing his assets and copies of charges that would be filed in what could only be described as a malicious prosecution.

"Very good," the man said. "Now, where do you want this parcel to go?"

"Send it to the Department buildings in a van. I'll let them know what to look for," the G-Man replied.

The criminal nodded in agreement.

"We'll keep in touch," he concluded, before turning to walk back out of the warehouse's small door.

The doorbell rang just as midday struck. Through the haze of the fog and the tension of the moment, Sarah, going about her day, walked to answer it. She was surprised to see two Gardai standing on her doorstep, their stern expressions matching their formal uniforms. One of them gripped a radio speaker on his chest.

"Is Charlie O'Donnell-Smith here?" one of them asked.

Sarah, startled, stuttered slightly before answering.

"Eh, uh, one moment," she replied.

She quickly ran to the back hallway, finding her father busy doing the laundry. She whispered the news to him, her voice filled with shock.

"Dad, Dad! There are two Gardai here looking for you."

Charlie's mouth dropped.

"Uh, right. I'll head out to them now," he said, still stunned.

He placed the laundry basket down, his movements slow as he approached the front door. Sarah quickly hid behind a

nearby doorway.

"Hello?" Charlie called as he stepped outside.

"Are you Charlie O'Donnell-Smith?" one of the Gardai asked.

"Yes," Charlie replied, his voice shaking.

"We are arresting you," one Garda continued, before reading him his rights. They then prompted him to step over to their car. Charlie obeyed, walking over slowly as they opened the door for him.

Suddenly, Daphne appeared, her eyes narrowed, her voice sharp.

"What is this?" she demanded.

"We are arresting him under the Criminal Finances Act," one Garda replied again.

"This is nonsense!" Daphne snapped, her voice tinged with indignation.

"We're just taking him to the station to question him," the Garda explained.

Daphne, though furious, grudgingly accepted their position. Her anger was palpable, and she wasn't a woman to be trifled with when in such a state.

The Gardai got into the car, which slowly reversed out of the driveway and drove off. Peter stormed over to his mother, his face flushed with anger.

"What the hell? Those charges are completely false!" he shouted.

"I know," Daphne replied, her voice quieter but filled with resolve. "We knew something like this might happen. But we'll deal with it and get through this. Don't worry."

Her words were meant to comfort, but they felt hollow. It was as though they were all passengers on a sinking ship, running to the top, trying to escape the inevitable.

"What do we do now? I don't think we have anything planned," Peter said, panic in his voice.

Kate had been watching the whole interaction from the bedroom window, her eyes peering through the gap in the old silk curtains. She'd remained out of the way, unsure of how to intervene. Being present during such family struggles could be difficult to navigate, but she also felt it was the right time to offer help.

"Um, um, would anybody like a cup of tea? I can boil the kettle now," she asked timidly, her voice uncertain but genuine.

Daphne, Peter, and Sarah appreciated the gesture, though it was a small act in the face of the larger situation.

"Don't worry," Daphne replied, her voice soft but tired. "I'll pour them. Would you like one?"

"Uh, I'm grand. Don't worry about me," Kate said, trying to brush off her offer.

It was in this household that Kate had come to understand the virtues of humility and compassion. Now, she had the chance to return the favour. She was deeply grateful for their support.

They went back into the kitchen, where Daphne flicked the switch on the stainless steel kettle. The water bubbled to life, steam rising as it filled the air with warmth. Daphne muttered under her breath, her words thick with dejection and fear.

"I'll pour them," Kate offered again, trying to be helpful.

"Yes, please," Daphne replied, her voice quieter now, as if she were exhausted by it all. It was rare for her to depend on a guest for such small things, but the situation had reduced her to lowering her own standards.

Once the kettle boiled, Kate set to work, preparing the cups. She selected two green mugs from the cupboard, placed a tea bag in each one, and poured the boiling water, using an antique silver teaspoon to gently move the tea bags in each cup. She then carried the cups over in pairs, offering them to

the O'Donnell-Smith family, each one accepting with a weary smile.

"Well," Daphne sighed, her voice heavy. "I have to go to the shop for some food. Would anybody like to come?"

"Actually, yeah, I'll come. I need to get out of the house," Sarah said, eager for a distraction.

"Yeah, me too," Peter added, still fuming but needing a break from the tension.

"I guess, then, we'll head off to the village in a minute," Daphne said. "What about you, Kate?"

"Yeah, sure," Kate acknowledged, glad to have a chance to help in any way she could.

13

The sun roasted the tarmac on the footpath that ran alongside the Garda station. A few desperate bugs scurried through the cracks, trying to escape the unbearable heat. The station, once a glamorous house built during the Celtic Tiger boom, was now a spacious facility, perfect for conversion into this kind of government establishment. Painted a bright yellow, with white window sills and sharp, out-jutting bricks on the corners, it looked like it belonged to somewhere far warmer than Ireland, where sunny days were rare. The blue glass of the 'Garda' wall light outside the front door shimmered in the heat. Two liveried Garda cars parked outside indicated a constant police presence in this otherwise isolated rural area.

A fan hummed softly from the front desk as it generated cool air. The Garda at the desk had his sleeves rolled up in an attempt to cope with the intense heat pouring through the large windows. A short, slouched man, his flat cap slightly askew, was trying to have his passport application witnessed. He had forgotten his glasses and struggled to read the fine print on the forms. Just a few years ago, all these procedures had been moved online, but after numerous hacks from foreign cyber-groups, the government had reverted to more traditional methods. The Garda's patience was wearing thin

as the man fumbled over the forms.

Behind the wall that held a notice board covered in information about domestic violence, child coaching vetting, and other community services, something far darker was unfolding. As Andre Malraux once wrote, "Man is not what he thinks he is; he is what he hides." And behind that wall, what was hidden was more sinister than anyone could have imagined.

"We know you funnelled that money through criminal operations. Don't lie to us; we have the evidence," one Garda interrogator pressed, his voice cold and unyielding.

Poor Charlie sat tied to a chair, his hands and feet cuffed to the legs. The room's only light came from a window, covered partially by privacy film. Sweat ran down his brow, and his mind raced with panic.

"It's all lies! There's no evidence, no proof. I'm not involved in any of this!" he shouted in defiance.

The second Garda slid a file across the table and opened it with deliberate slowness, revealing a collection of documents. These were the same ones the Revenue officer had passed to the mysterious figure in the warehouse. Waving them in front of Charlie, the Garda presented emails and other communications that allegedly tied him to illicit activities.

"That's all fabricated. You'll see that if you investigate further!" Charlie spat, his anger rising.

"There's a lot of material here. It can't all be wrong," the Garda shot back, unfazed.

Charlie clenched his jaw. "This is a set-up! I need to know who's behind this, and where did you get these documents from?"

"We can't disclose our sources," the Garda replied dismissively. "You don't need to know."

"Under what law is that protected?" Charlie retorted, his frustration reaching a boiling point. "Tell me which act that's

covered under!”

“The Protected Disclosures Act,” the Garda answered, his tone rigid.

Charlie shook his head in disbelief. “So, this is where we’re at? You’re going to arrest me based on anonymous tip-offs?”

“We have what we need to charge you,” the Garda stated curtly, his words cold.

Back at the house, Daphne was trying her best to keep some normalcy. She, along with Sarah, Peter, and Kate, was walking through a garden centre, trying to distract themselves. Despite the vibrant flowers, a palpable tension hung in the air. Sarah, worried sick about her father’s fate, could barely bring herself to look at the blossoms. Peter’s eyes were downcast, brooding in silence. Kate, once a sharp, vocal presence, now kept her words to a minimum, assuming a quiet, protective role.

“Ya, they are lovely,” Sarah said, though her heart wasn’t in it.

Daphne picked up a tub of flowers and placed it in the basket, the weight of her burden settling on her shoulders. The family walked in silence, their individual anxieties hanging like an unspoken cloud. The staff member, a young college student, approached them, offering water.

“We’re grand, thanks,” Daphne replied, forcing a smile.

The journey to the car was long, and once inside, Daphne tried to push her fears aside. “I’m going to throw on some fish when we get home,” she suggested, attempting to keep the mood light.

“Yes, that would be nice,” Sarah said, her voice barely above a murmur.

Kate nodded, her response faint but clear.

But as the car sped along the winding country roads, Daphne couldn’t ignore the weight in her chest. It had been over four hours since Charlie had been taken, and with every

passing minute, the unknown gnawed at her insides. Sarah leaned her head against the misty window, eyes closed, lost in her own anxious thoughts. Peter was rigid in his seat, eyes blank, but his body was tense with worry. Kate, despite being an outsider to the situation, could feel the ripple of fear spreading through the family.

Back home, the television played in the background, a stark reminder of the absurdity of the world outside. U.S. President Kanye West, his snapback cap worn backwards, was making headlines with his outlandish proposal to invade Belgium, all in the name of selling more Yeezys. Daphne, seething with frustration, reached for the remote and turned it off, unable to bear the foolishness any longer.

"What a load of tripe," she muttered, throwing the remote down in disgust.

Peter, unable to keep quiet any longer, blurted, "When will we find out what's happening to Dad?"

"I don't know," Daphne replied quietly, sinking deeper into the weight of her worry.

"They'll have to come back to us soon. If they don't release him, they're going to charge him with something," Sarah interjected, trying to remain pragmatic.

"Well, I'm here to help, no matter what happens," Kate added softly, her voice a little more confident now.

"Thanks, Kate," Sarah said, offering a small, appreciative smile.

Before Daphne could pour more tea, the doorbell rang. Peter's head snapped up. His eyes wide, he leapt to his feet.

"Who is that?"

"I'll go," Sarah volunteered quickly, rushing towards the door.

She opened it to find the same two Garda officers from earlier, standing with their backs turned, as if they already knew what they were about to deliver wasn't going to be well

received.

"Mrs O'Donnell-Smith," one of the officers began, "We're here to inform you that Charlie O'Donnell-Smith has been charged with tax evasion under the Criminal Finances Act. We will be in touch with you regarding the timeline for the upcoming process."

Daphne's stomach dropped. Her heart pounded in her chest as the words settled into her mind. The officers turned away and left without another word, their footsteps echoing down the driveway.

The house felt colder the moment the door closed behind her. She walked slowly into the kitchen, where Sarah, Peter, and Kate were all waiting, their eyes fixed on her. Daphne took a deep breath before she spoke.

"Dad has been charged with tax evasion," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

The silence in the room was deafening. Sarah's face drained of colour as Peter buried his face in his hands.

"What are we going to do?" Peter muttered, his voice muffled.

"I don't know," Daphne replied, her shoulders sagging. "We'll have to think of something, quick."

Two days later, the postman arrived. His footsteps echoed on the gravel path as he approached the door, a bundle of parcels under his arm. Sarah signed for the delivery, the weight of the envelope with the State seal in her hands like a brick.

This wasn't just any letter. This was the letter. Sarah hesitated, her mind racing. She wouldn't open it until she'd gathered everyone together. The anticipation was unbearable.

The minutes stretched like hours as she stood in the kitchen, waiting for Daphne to finish hanging the laundry. When she finally came inside, Sarah handed her the letter. Daphne's hands shook as she held it, already knowing what

it contained.

"What is it, Mum?" Sarah asked, desperate to know.

Daphne swallowed hard, her face pale. "Sarah," she began, "Your father has been formally charged with tax evasion. If he's convicted, he's facing serious jail time."

Sarah's mouth went dry. "But... but... It's all lies! This is nonsense!" she shouted, her voice full of hope.

"It's not that simple," Daphne replied, the weight of her words like a ton of bricks. "Just because you know he's innocent doesn't mean the court will see it that way. The truth... sometimes it doesn't matter in the system."

Daphne's voice cracked, and a tear slipped down her cheek. Sarah's heart ached for her mother, but she wasn't going to let it go down this way.

The hours passed, and the weight of their situation hung heavy in the air. Daphne sat in an old armchair, the glass of water still untouched in her hand. Sarah, on the other hand, was already thinking ahead, determined to find a way to clear her father's name. And she knew exactly where she needed to start.

The tractor.

14

“Did you find it?”

Kate’s voice had the sharpness of one who is both eager and vexed. The air in the small room was thick with anticipation, and the restless tapping of her foot echoed her impatience.

Peter, crouching low before the wooden drawers of the desk, was clearly struggling. His hands, though deft, betrayed a hint of frustration as they rifled through the papers, scattering them haphazardly.

“It’s here somewhere,” he muttered, more to himself than to anyone else, the rustle of paper filling the room. He paused, then added, “I’m certain I put it in one of these.”

He crouched lower, pulling out drawer after drawer. The dim light from the desk lamp gleamed off the worn wood, throwing long shadows across the room. But still, there was no sign of what he sought.

“Damn it! I can’t find it,” he said with a sigh, standing upright. His frustration was palpable now, an edge to his voice.

“We can’t go on like this,” Sarah remarked from across the room, the quiet worry in her tone betraying the tension she felt. She glanced over at Peter, who, now standing with his

hands on his hips, looked ready to give up.

"Hold on," Peter replied, suddenly struck with an idea. "I'll get us a detailed vehicle history check online. I don't know how much GDPR has affected things, but it might give us a lead. Something's better than nothing."

Without further ado, he took a seat at the black swivel chair beside the desk, his fingers dancing across the keys of the iMac with renewed purpose. The soft whir of the computer filled the silence as he began his search.

"It's here," he muttered after a few moments. "Buy it," Sarah urged eagerly.

Peter clicked the 'purchase' button without a word, his irritation turning to quiet determination. At that moment, the sound of a door slamming from somewhere in the house made him start. His brow furrowed. Was it their mother? She wasn't supposed to know anything about this.

Quickly, Peter turned off the computer screen, stood up, and made a beeline for the door, his movements swift and sure. Sarah, already on her feet, tiptoed toward the edge of the doorway, peering down the stairs.

"Hello? Where have ye gone?" came a voice, loud and unmistakable.

It was Kate. Peter exhaled deeply, tension lifting from his shoulders. "Phew," he muttered, turning the screen back on.

"I'm coming up," Kate called, her steps already audible on the staircase.

Kate appeared at the door, a questioning look on her face. She was nothing if not curious.

"What are you up to?" she asked, her eyes narrowing slightly.

"Here's the deal," Sarah said, stepping forward. "We're tracking down the former owner of the tractor."

Kate blinked in confusion. "What? Why would you do that? I know it got burned out, but beyond that, it doesn't

seem like there's any connection to what happened with Dad."

"No, see," Sarah insisted, her eyes brightening, "there's a backstory to the tractor. It was bought by Dad at an auction run by HMRC, along with some other things. The lot was made up of the personal effects of a former English crime lord."

Kate's eyes widened. "A crime lord?!" she exclaimed, taken aback. "I thought I was the dodgy one!"

Sarah shrugged, a wry smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Well, I only found out a few minutes ago from Peter." She gestured toward him. "We're hoping that this report will help us trace who this person was."

Peter, who had been quietly working at the desk, suddenly stood, a triumphant look on his face.

"I've got it!" he declared, his voice filled with excitement. "Here's the last owner before Dad bought it."

Sarah and Kate leaned over the desk, peering at the screen. Peter read aloud, carefully scanning the details.

"It says his name was Gerry Wilson. He lived in Scarborough, East Yorkshire, England, at the time of the tractor's seizure. Let me look him up."

Peter quickly opened a new browser tab and typed in the name. The results that followed made his breath catch. Newspaper articles, reports of criminal investigations and trials, spanned decades. Peter clicked on the first link, his eyes widening as he read aloud.

"It says here he was behind the killing of three investigative journalists."

"Good heavens," Kate gasped. "Is this the same man who's after Dad?"

Peter nodded slowly. "It is. And we need to move fast. If we're smart, we won't get ourselves killed in the process."

"Smart? How exactly are we going to do that?" Kate asked,

her skepticism evident.

"We'll track him down the old-fashioned way," Peter said, his voice cool and determined. "I'm going to contact the journalists who covered Wilson. They'll have details on his whereabouts, or at least a lead to follow."

Kate blinked, impressed. "That's clever. I never would've thought of that."

"The journalists usually list their contact information on their articles," Peter explained. "It should be straightforward enough to reach out."

"Alright, I'm going to make a pizza before Mum gets back," Sarah said suddenly, a change of focus. She stood up from her spot by the door and headed downstairs.

Peter nodded absentmindedly as he began drafting his first email to the journalist, trying to phrase it in a way that wouldn't arouse suspicion. He knew it would be no easy task, but if it meant saving his father, it would be worth it.

The smell of food soon wafted upstairs, but Peter hardly noticed. His mind was already preoccupied with the next steps. He had to be careful, cautious—if they were to succeed, they could not afford to make a single misstep.

Later that evening, when Daphne arrived home, the scent of pizza filled the air, signalling the end of a long, uneasy day. But even as Sarah and Kate settled into the kitchen, chatting about inconsequential matters, Peter remained distracted. The email from the journalist had come through.

Peter's phone buzzed in his pocket, and without hesitation, he excused himself, claiming he wasn't feeling well. He made his way upstairs, a sudden chill running through him. The email had revealed what he'd hoped for.

"Bingo," he muttered under his breath. The message contained a clue, a lead on Wilson's whereabouts.

He scrolled through the map on his phone, noting the location. It was a remote area, a townland in East Yorkshire.

As he zoomed in on the satellite view, his eyes landed on something unusual: a modern lock on a seemingly abandoned property, its sleek, gleaming features standing in stark contrast to the dilapidated walls.

Peter's heart quickened. This was it. This was the place. The place that could lead them to the answers they needed.

His mind raced as he thought about how to proceed. His plan was simple: gather evidence, remain unseen, and take the first step towards clearing his father's name.

But even as he formulated his plan, a part of him could not ignore the risk. This was no ordinary man they were up against. Wilson's influence was vast, his reputation lethal.

"I'll tell Sarah when Mum's gone," Peter thought, settling back onto his bed, deep in thought.

The road ahead was uncertain, but one thing was clear: they had no choice but to press forward. Time was running out, and if they didn't act soon, it might be too late.

15

“Right, let’s go now,” Peter whispered, his voice low as he motioned for the others to follow.

The wind howled through the countryside, whipping against the high ditches on either side of the narrow country road. It carried with it the bitter chill of an early autumn morning, and the grey clouds hung heavy overhead, casting the whole world in a dull, overcast gloom. Peter was the first to move, his boots crunching on the gravel as he stepped towards the boundary hedge, pushing aside the wild tangles of bramble and ivy that had crept over the roadside. His dark green wax jacket blended well with the hedgerow, and Sarah and Kate followed him closely, each of them aware of the urgency in their movements.

With adrenaline coursing through their veins, the three of them dashed across the open patch of ground between the road and the building, not pausing to take in the view, their only focus the task at hand. Kate glanced over her shoulder, seeing no one else around. She turned to the others.

“I reckon if we’re quick, we might find something useful here,” she whispered, glancing toward the old farmhouse.

Sarah nodded, her eyes scanning the surroundings. “We’re not exactly detectives, but if there’s anything that connects

this place to an address, or any sort of lead to follow, it might be worth the risk."

The three of them crept round to the back of the house, where a pile of parcels, carelessly stacked on a wooden pallet, lay exposed to the weather. A 1990s BMW sat nearby, its dark green paint faded and dull, the tyres sagging under the weight of neglect. Cobwebs had settled around the side mirrors, and a thick layer of dust had gathered on the bodywork, indicating it hadn't been moved in quite some time.

Peter stopped suddenly, his gaze fixed on the back door of the house.

"Hold on a minute," he murmured, squinting at something that caught his eye.

"What is it?" Kate asked, moving closer.

"Look, the key's still in the door!" Peter said, his voice tinged with disbelief.

For a house that, from the front, boasted what seemed like state-of-the-art security systems, it was odd—no, downright suspicious—that the key should be left in the back entrance.

"That can't be right," Sarah said, frowning. "Who leaves a key in the back door?"

Kate glanced over at her, a wry smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "I think we should take a look, don't you?"

Sarah hesitated. "Are you sure? What if there's something dangerous inside?"

Kate's response came quickly, and with a certainty that made it hard to argue. "Are we not already in a dangerous situation?" She shot Sarah a look, her eyebrows raised in challenge. "I mean, we've come this far. We can't stop now."

Peter stepped forward, placing a reassuring hand on Sarah's shoulder. "Look, she's right. This could be the break we need. The key's right there, and if we don't act now, we

might never get another chance. Dad's future could be hanging by a thread. We have to do this."

Despite the knot of fear tightening in her stomach, Sarah knew Peter was right. But still, doubt lingered. "What if we get shot?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper, her hands trembling.

Peter laughed softly, though his eyes betrayed the tension he felt. "Don't be daft. There's no one here. They've made a huge mistake, and it's our chance to fix it. Come on."

With a final glance at Kate, Sarah reluctantly followed, her heart hammering in her chest. Peter approached the door and carefully turned the handle, wary of triggering any hidden alarm. The door was new, sleek, with frosted glass panes that suggested it had been fitted not long ago. He eased it open, the hinges creaking faintly, but there was no sudden burst of blaring alarms or flashing lights.

Inside, the place was dark, save for the faint glow of daylight filtering through the thick curtains. Peter's eyes darted around, finding a light switch on the wall. He flicked it on, revealing a cluttered workshop filled with crates and stacks of goods, the air thick with the smell of dust and dampness.

"Bloody hell," Peter muttered under his breath, eyes wide with disbelief.

"A real criminal hideout," he added, but Sarah's eyes lit up with something unexpected.

"Super cool!" she said, her voice filled with an excitement that took Peter by surprise.

Peter stared at her for a moment, his mouth slightly agape. "It's... it's not cool, Sarah. This place is dangerous."

"We need to move quickly," Kate cut in, her voice steady and practical. "These aren't the sort of people you want to cross. Trust me, I've run into folks like these back in town, and they're not ones you can reason with."

Peter nodded grimly. "Right, let's get searching."

Sarah's gaze fell on a wooden shelf along the far wall, where several old folders and journals were stacked in a disorganised pile. She went to it immediately, blowing off a thick layer of dust from the cover of the nearest folder before flipping it open. She blinked in confusion as the first page was written in Spanish, but as she turned it over, the contents became clear. The folder detailed a poisoning scheme tied to the Cuban government, used on political prisoners. The documents included chemical formulas, distribution chains, and money transfers. The date on them—May 2023—made her stomach twist.

"Oh my God," she whispered in disbelief, her hands shaking as she scanned the pages.

Peter, however, was busy at a desk nearby, sifting through piles of paperwork with renewed urgency. "Sarah, come here," he called out. "You need to see this."

Sarah and Kate hurried over to him. Peter pulled a folder from the stack and turned it around for them to see.

"Look at this," Peter said, his voice tight with tension. "It says here that Dad signed off on the search warrant for the police raid in 2006—£9 million worth of cocaine was uncovered. And look at this—someone's drawing up plans to frame him for fraud. This must be why they're after him now. But why wait until now?"

Sarah, still reeling from what she'd just read, looked at the folder she was holding. "I think I know why," she said quietly, handing it to Peter. "They've been expanding their operations. They've got their fingers in far too many pies now, including Cuba. The man behind this is probably trying to clear anyone who could get in the way."

Peter's face darkened. "That must be it. If Charlie has knowledge of them, then he's a threat to their operations."

Kate's sharp eyes darted towards the front of the house.

"We're not alone," she said quickly. "Someone's coming."

Peter's heart skipped a beat. "Shit! Let's get out of here, quick!" he yelled, grabbing the folders and turning toward the back door.

The gravel on the driveway crackled as a car pulled up. A man stepped out—tall, dark hair slicked back, an intimidating figure. He wore black from head to toe, and his piercings glittered in the dim light. Peter's stomach dropped.

"Oi! Get back here, or you're dead!" the man shouted, advancing toward them.

"Run for it!" Kate screamed, and the three of them bolted toward the hedge.

But as they neared the hedge, Peter got caught on a length of rusty barbed wire.

"Wait! I'm stuck!" he yelled.

Sarah and Kate turned back, horror in their eyes as they saw the thug closing in. Peter's heart pounded as he reached out to them. "Take the folder, go!" he shouted.

"Run!" he urged. "I'll be fine!"

Sarah grabbed the folder, and with a frantic glance toward Peter, she turned and sprinted toward the car. Kate followed, but the thug was almost upon Peter.

"Get back here!" the man yelled, his voice laced with fury.

The girls reached the car, throwing open the doors and slamming them shut. Sarah threw the folder into the backseat before gunning the engine, the tyres screeching as she sped away.

As they tore down the country lanes, Kate shot a glance back toward the rearview mirror. "We need to get to the police, now," she said, voice urgent.

Sarah shook her head. "Not yet. We go back for Peter. We don't leave anyone behind."

Kate swallowed hard, but nodded. "You're right."

With one final look at the road ahead, Sarah slammed her

foot on the accelerator. The hunt wasn't over.

16

The tyres screamed in protest as Sarah shot out of the parking lot, her foot heavy on the accelerator. She raced through the streets like a wild animal on the hunt, switching lanes with reckless abandon and weaving around cars the way a race driver might navigate a NASCAR track. Her heart pounded in her chest as she screeched to a halt outside the police station, grabbed the folders from the back seat, and ran inside, her boots thudding on the polished floors.

The receptionist, clearly taken aback by the sight of a young woman bursting through the door in such a state, blinked at her.

"Sorry, um, can I help you?" she asked, clearly unsure what to make of the situation.

"I need to see the chief inspector, right now!" Sarah blurted, nearly out of breath. "I've got evidence about a massive international criminal gang operating out of Yorkshire, England. This stuff's serious! It's..."

She was interrupted by the officer who had questioned her father earlier. His tone was dismissive.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but we're not in a position to deal with you at this moment," he said, his voice flat.

Sarah's hands balled into fists. "What? You're telling me to

wait? This involves one of the most dangerous criminal gangs of our time, and what they've done to my father!"

The officer barely blinked. "Well, look, you'll have to come back later in the week."

Before Sarah could snap back, the chief inspector appeared, stepping out from his office. His presence was commanding.

"What's going on here?" he asked, addressing the officer.

Sarah didn't waste a second. "This is a life and death situation! My father's been framed, and this evidence will prove it! Look at these files!" she nearly shouted, thrusting the folders into his hands.

The chief inspector flipped through the pages, his eyebrows raising with every new revelation. "Young women?" he muttered under his breath, then looked up at Sarah. "You look like you've been through the ringer. How about we go to my office for a sit-down and a cup of tea?"

"Tell me about it," Sarah muttered, exhaustion in her voice.

The chief inspector led her into his office, where she collapsed into a chair, finally able to catch her breath. Meanwhile, at the hospital, Peter was getting examined by the medical team. The doctors were murmuring amongst themselves as they checked his bloodshot eye.

"Looks alright," one of the doctors murmured. "That left eye's a bit concerning, though. Let's run a few scans."

Back home, Daphne was becoming more and more agitated. What was taking them so long? It didn't make sense. She couldn't wait any longer. Picking up the phone, she dialed Sarah's number.

"Hi, Mum, what's up?" Sarah answered, her voice tense but relieved.

"Where on earth are you? You should've been home hours ago! Has something happened?"

Sarah couldn't help the smile that crept onto her face.

"Mum, it's all okay. Dad will be free! We've proven his innocence!"

"What?" Daphne's voice was a mix of disbelief and relief.

"He was set up by a criminal gang—bitter about a warrant he signed years ago. I'm with the chief inspector right now. It's all going to be sorted."

Daphne let out a sigh of relief, but her concern still lingered. "When will you be home?"

"I'll be home soon," Sarah replied. "I just have to collect Peter. He's in town."

There was a moment of hesitation before Daphne responded, "Right... but, are they both okay? Peter sounded... well, I don't know."

"I'm sure they're fine... well, mostly. Peter's got some swelling. We'll see when we get there."

With that, Sarah hung up and slipped the phone back into her pocket just as the chief inspector walked back into the room. "Good news," he said, his voice calm but filled with authority. "All charges against your father have been dropped, and there will be a public apology issued to him and your family. We've also sent our armed response unit to the safe house. It looks like they locked one of their own inside, and when their buddies showed up to break him out, we caught a big group of them. Their operation's bigger than we ever imagined. Thanks to you, we were able to stop them. We're even looking at nominating you for a civic award."

Sarah jumped up from her seat, disbelief washing over her. "Oh my God."

Before she could say more, the chief inspector gestured to the doorway. "There's someone here to see you."

And then, as if on cue, a figure stepped into the room. It was her father, Charlie, looking worn but very much alive.

"Dad!" Sarah gasped, her voice cracking.

"Sarah!" Charlie cried out, and before she could stop

herself, Sarah ran straight into his arms, hugging him tightly.

"You saved me," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

"It's nothing, Dad," she said, her voice thick with relief.

"They're getting my release papers now," he continued, "I'll be home within the hour."

"Thank God," Sarah whispered, tears welling in her eyes.

Not long after, they were in the car, Charlie in tow.

"We just need to pick up Peter and Kate from the hospital on the way back," Sarah said as she started the engine.

"What?" Charlie sounded confused.

"Don't worry, they're fine," Sarah assured him. "Well, Peter's face is a bit swollen, but they're okay. Mostly. I'm sure they'll be fine."

Charlie shot her a concerned look, but didn't argue.

Pulling up at A&E, Sarah saw Kate and Peter standing outside, Peter holding an ice pack to his face. She rolled down the window, leaning out. "Everything alright?" she called.

"Yeah," Kate replied, giving her a half-smile. "Peter's just got a bit of swelling. Nothing's broken. Let's go home!"

With that, they piled into the back of the car, and Sarah pulled away, her foot heavy on the accelerator as she made her way home.

Daphne was in the kitchen when they arrived, the glow of a purple and orange sky streaming through the windows. The old saying about a red sky at night crossed her mind, though she wasn't sure what it meant. A sigh of relief escaped her lips as she sipped from her mug of tea, never feeling more grateful.

That was, until Sarah pulled up outside the house.

"Thank God! You're home! I never thought it'd happen!" Daphne exclaimed, running out to meet them.

"We somehow made it," Sarah replied with a weary smile.

"Come inside. Let's have a nice hot cup of tea."

Daphne's eyes immediately fell on Peter, still clutching the

ice pack to his face. "Oh dear! What happened? Peter, are you alright?"

Kate answered before Peter had a chance to speak. "He'll be fine. Just needs a cup of tea."

The family gathered around the table, the warmth of tea and togetherness filling the room. Despite their differences—Sarah's unyielding determination, Peter's quiet stoicism, Kate's resilience, Daphne's motherly concern, and Charlie's unshakable faith in his daughter—they had all come together in the face of adversity. Their varied backgrounds, the experiences that set them apart, no longer seemed to divide them. In that moment, they were united by their shared strength, their mutual respect, and the understanding that together, they could overcome even the most insurmountable of obstacles. What had once seemed like an insurmountable barrier—prejudices, differences in upbringing, the tension between them—had dissolved through the trials they had faced together. They had learned that compassion, trust, and perseverance could transcend anything that divided them, and as they sat there in the warmth of the kitchen, it was clear: they were stronger for it, and more connected than ever before.

Escaping a challenged lifestyle, Kate's world is turned on its head when she reluctantly agrees to move in with her rural cousins, the quiet family of O'Donnell-Smiths. Troubled, but well meaning, she is a strong willed girl of her time. Her personality clashes with her cousins, whom she regards as out of touch, as they cannot move with the times. However, they work to overcome their divide when the family is thrown into jeopardy by the iniquitous actions of others. This story aims to show how that in a world where those with different origins are pitted against each other, and are driven apart, the pressing need to prevail in the name of common decency triumphs above all superficial differences.



This novel was completed by 19 year-old Tadhg Quill-Manley, then an undergraduate student at UCC, having won the title of Best Screenplay at the Philadelphia Youth Film Festival, and being shortlisted for the same at the Beverly Hills International Film Festival, both at the mere age of 18.